

YURI
OLESHA

ENVY



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Translated by J. C. Butler



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Translation from the Russian
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Ю. Олеша
ЗАВИСТЬ
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FOREWORD

...Odessa's a colourful place.

From over the blue mountain of empty sea ships used to bring foreigners — French, English, Greeks. They divided up Odessa — sometimes with barbed wire. Mostly, with just rows of chairs — these were the boundaries of the land then occupied by the forces of the Intervention.

The foreign soldiers used to marvel at your town.

The nets they cast over it turned out to be like cobwebs: they tore easily.

In this town, cut off from the outside world, the young people wrote poetry. Among them was Yuri Olesha. His first poems were published in 1916 in *Odesskii listok*. However, these poems were like a light bout of measles: a disease everyone has to catch that you soon forget about — as long as you don't catch cold as well.

There were poetry societies at which they read their verses to each other. The young poets mercilessly criticized each other because the present was worth nothing when compared to the future.

Yuri left school just as the Revolution began. He entered the Novorossiisk University in Odessa and studied there for a year.

Everything was undergoing change.

The headmaster of his school, who knew Hesiod and Virgil's *Georgics*, became a shepherd

from pride. There were Green bandits on the very edge of town. One day some ataman — I don't remember his name — forced his way into town on a horse-tram.

War came riding into the town on different band-wagons.

Olesha volunteered for the Red Army.

He served as a telephonist in a Black Sea Defence battery, which was positioned on the beach.

Mayakovsky's voice, the Revolution's voice boomed over the country.

During the period of War Communism Olesha worked in Yugrost*, where Mayakovsky's innovations were being put into practice; he took part in political sketches and wrote. He was endowed by the Revolution with the impassioned voice of an agitator who had a clear vision of the future and spoke clearly and with conviction about it.

In 1922 the young poet moved to Kharkov where he wrote short plays and learned to write prose — rejecting it himself.

Blue-eyed Olesha came to Moscow, already the author of several books, and equipped with considerable knowledge and numerous poems which he himself no longer liked.

He looked for work.

Subsequently he was to write:

"One of the fondest memories of my life is my work for the newspaper *Gudok*. Everything was joined together here: my youth, the youth of my Soviet land, the youth of our press and our journalism.

* Yugrost — abbreviation for the Southern Russian Telegraph Agency.— *Ed.*

"I joined *Gudok*, incidentally, not as a journalist at all. I worked in what was then known as the 'information department', and my work consisted of putting in envelopes the letters which the department chief had written to worker-correspondents* at various addresses."

Gudok was an organ of the Railwaymen's Union whose workers were scattered throughout the country's artery-like railway network. They greatly valued links between each other. The branches of the railways were festooned with letters and the letters flowed like tree sap.

There were three in the department: Olesha, the Komsomol-member secretary, and the department chief, writer Ivan Ovchinnikov, the compiler of *Gudok's* satirical fourth page.

Their shadowy room was in one of Moscow's largest houses, formerly an orphanage, whose side faced Kitaigorod wall**. It was haunted by children's tears and deaths. It had long corridors, high ceilings, numerous rooms, staircases, and housed numerous trade unions. It became known as the Palace of Labour.

It was teeming with proposals, notices, complaints and correspondents who were always tirelessly on the move in search of the truth.

"One day," wrote Olesha, "my department chief, Ivan Ovchinnikov, suggested I wrote a satirical piece in verse on a worker-correspondent's letter."

It turned out that when a poet is given a

* Worker-correspondents — workers who contributed to local and central newspapers on a regular basis.— *Ed.*

** Kitaigorod wall — "China Town" wall, erected around Moscow's old centre, which included Red Square, and the district to the east of the Kremlin.— *Ed.*

theme like this, the words fit together differently, and the rhymes change and sound life-like.

The satire was printed and signed "Zubilo" (Chisel).

A chisel is a crude tool used to chip the scales off ingots, and chop iron rods to bits. A chisel is a crude, rudimentary, resonant tool.

The signature "Zubilo" appeared in *Gudok* over six years. The worker-correspondents used to visit Olesha. He was their leader.

Together they defended labour rights on the railways and in railway settlements, big and small.

Olesha was the worker-correspondents' god. He used to rewrite their pieces in such a way that they recognised themselves.

Experience as a writer, poetry society debates, a professional reappraisal of Pushkin's work, restive and original talent — all of these came together in Yuri Olesha when he became "Zubilo".

Yuri Olesha wrote over five hundred satirical pieces for *Gudok*. Although they contain many unique characteristic features of that period they have still to be collected together and published.

There were then people as different as Bulgakov, Petrov, Katayev and Ilf all working on *Gudok*. They wrote about the present in their various ways. They reflected contemporary life and became increasingly more unlike each other.

Time is a great ruler. The fourth page of *Gudok* reorganised the writer's destiny.

Newspaper work opened up tremendous opportunities for creative work.

A newspaper is produced supposedly just

for one day but the events described in it change history, change the smooth flow of time with inventions, discoveries, revolutions and wars.

The very word "creativity" contains a notion of what will appear anew.

...The time demanded another form, more diversified and rich in subject matter.

Olesha immediately mastered the art of writing simply and clearly. The result was *The Three Fat Men*, a children's fairytale, written on newsprint on the floor and not on a table, *The Three Fat Men*, who were to become a new myth.

This fairytale, which was written half a century ago by a poet and newspaper worker, has been translated into dozens of languages.

It is read by every new generation of children.

It has been made into a film and a ballet.

The fairytale's heroine is a little girl who pretended to be a doll in order to penetrate an enemy castle. Such subjects were already well-known in the circus.

In the fairytale there is also a clown, the entire troupe of a travelling circus, and rich folk humour. Tightrope walking is contrasted with the formal dance taught by the teacher One-Two-Three.

Other teaching is done by Doctor Gaspar.

Doctor Gaspar could well have been the inventor of gunpowder.

As Pushkin said, gunpowder has triumphed over knighthood...

...Some stars are extraordinarily condensed. They are so heavy, so striking and powerful that they curve their own rays of light.

The time of revolutions is condensed.

A man whose job is to sort out worker-correspondents' letters writes a small novel for children, which is complex in style, and creates a miracle. Children understand this new complex form.

And at the same time the same person writes *Envy*.

What creates its subject?

The subject is created by the sensations being experienced as the moral laws change.

The tale depicts the triumph of the weak over the strong. The all-out efforts of people coming to the rescue of their loved ones. The tale describes how a family splits up and then comes together again, and how states crumble.

Art is life reinterpreted.

The work of a sausage-maker is unpoetic. It comes under what is known as a service industry.

The position of a person rejecting the pleasures of life in order to think the way he wants to — only adhering to old precepts — seems poetic and even chivalrous. But Pushkin in his draft of *Scenes from the Days of Chivalry* calls the knight "the epitome of mediocrity".

The new way of life with all its difficulties, very real, and accurately described, evokes the envy of the past: envy not of a woman or of wealth but of a new attitude to labour.

Envy depicts the tragedy attending the clash between the old and the new.

Its denouement comes with what Aristotle once called *catharsis*. Catharsis is a feeling of liberation, the alleviation of pain through necessity...

...By the time he had reached creative matu-

rity, the life of writer Yuri Olesha seemed wonderful. His prose determined the pulse of literature at the time. He wrote a book of short stories on new subjects.

He wrote a play based on *The Three Fat Men* and it ran at the Moscow Arts Theatre. Next came the play *A List of Virtues*, followed by *The Conspiracy of Feelings*. It seemed his stature could not have been higher.

And the film scripts — *Marshland Soldiers*, *Engineer Kochin's Error*, *The Stern Youth* — were written. They were all made into films and all highly acclaimed. Of the greatest interest was *The Stern Youth* but it was only released many years later.

Yuri Olesha was himself the sort of person who was always the soul of any company. His remarks were repeated and became popular sayings...

...I was given the task of sorting through his archives, and I read scores of openings to plays, all of them excellent. But Olesha the playwright and man of letters kept silent.

New success required deep drilling.

The writer, as it were, repeated his own mistakes by succumbing to "the lofty malaise of inspiration"...

...Not all is invention in literature. When a city is described, it is not invented. Heroes are invented — attitudes are not.

The amount of invention is decreasing...

...Myths formed the base of the ancient tragedy. For Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides a myth was the object of dispute: they reinterpreted the myths, relying on them as documents, expressing their very own present-day vision.

These myths turned out to be like the pupils of eyes which could see all that was new.

A new creation is needed, new architectural forms*.

Olesha wrote: "What is a plan? I see separate stages. Like piers on which the bridge of the whole work will rest."

He used to tell me he was creating stones, which had then to form an archway, and mould into a new form...

...All of us, big and small writers alike, who have seen the great threshold of the world's history and are taking part in the conquest of snowy passes, are attempting to register the moment when attitudes undergo a change.

Olesha began working on the play *The Death of Zand*, creating integral pieces about the changes to the feelings of jealousy, egocentricity, and the sense of ownership, and then he left these pieces. Thus, troops, marching across a pass, leave their night camps.

One has to touch reality itself; one has to become a great worker-correspondent of the New Time.

The author himself wrote: "I'm beginning to loathe fiction, and every kind of invention in literature; perhaps this is simply through creative impotence and an inability to write. That's possibly it. At any rate, I hasten to add that the glue of an epic work is not flowing from my pen (to put it grandly)."

* Anton Chekhov said: "New forms are needed. There is a need for new forms and if there aren't any, then better have nothing at all." (Collected Works in 12 volumes, vol. 9, Moscow, 1956, p. 232. In Russian.)

These are diary notes. The author, who is already renowned, and who has already achieved success of every kind, writes of himself: "I am suspended between two worlds. This real-life situation is so bizarre that its mere description makes just as entertaining reading as the most skilled fiction."

The years were going by, years of ventures.

Fragments were created, cut in the same way as rough diamonds, the top and bottom of the stone divided into facets to achieve a perfect reflection of reality, in this case, with rays of light.

A ray looks for lazars.

The drafts are left unfinished but the fragments are already diamonds...

...During the last years of his life Olesha had been making plans for a new book in which his ventures were reinterpreted in a new way...

...Olesha's prose pieces have denouements of their own. They contain an element of what Lev Tolstoy referred to as "the new original moral attitude of the author to the subject".

They were created by a man of our times, a man with a capacity for observing, for experiencing dismay and joy, and for leafing through the old in order to catch glimpses of the new.

Thus appeared the book *Not a Day Without a Line*. It lay in the writer's files, easily distinguishable if only by the colour of the paper: hence the discovery of radio-active material.

The book does not have a consistent plot but the phenomenon of a new perception is felt...

Olesha had lazer vision.

Subject metaphors comprise Olesha's vision.

He sees a dragonfly and that it looks like an airplane.

Olesha himself notes that he sees the two possibilities at once: an object does not replace another but enhances it.

A tree in autumn is like a gypsy girl, and you see both the tree and the gypsy girl.

Olesha had a way of getting you to perceive things anew and his own perception was always remarkably fresh.

Olesha's most daring metaphors — bridges compared to cats — cause young readers to exclaim in delight because they, too, see the world in a new light and enter it afresh. The world of children is metaphorical: it is a world of daring visions and comparisons. One "childish word" causes a fantastic myth to spring alive.

The first breath of life — that's what the book *Not a Day Without a Line* is like...

...A snowstorm was raging through Lavrushinski Lane, past the Tretyakov Art Gallery, subsiding as it flew along. On my way down the street I met Vera Inber. Just then Olesha was walking along the other side of the street, covered all over in snow, his strong back arched, and his handsome head in a felt hat lowered. Vera Inber said to me enviously: "He looks like Vesuvius in snow."

Later I saw Vesuvius. A small bright cloud was suspended over it, and it was alive. It was in the throes of a snowstorm, it, a signal of the activity of the Earth's depths, had conquered snow.

Through dry land and through the waters of the oceans we drill towards the depths. This year or this decade, sometime soon, we shall

discover the essence of our mother — Earth. We shall solve the enigma of Vesuvius. So we should be grateful to the people who strove towards Discovery through the mass of water and stone, through difficulties, through numerous ventures and experiments.

And the books created in the meantime are not disappearing either: they are, after all, the heritage of the epoch. They reflect the soul of the artist and the soul of the Revolution.

Yuri Olesha's life had a logic of its own.

A writer with a complex destiny, of standing reputation, he set off in search of a new form and never gave up looking for it.

Not a day without a line, not a day without great books, not a day without new knowledge.

Victor Shklovsky

PART ONE

I

He sings in the mornings in the lavatory. You can imagine what a happy, healthy man he must be. The urge to sing comes naturally to him, like a reflex. These songs of his, which have neither tunes nor words, just a series of "ta-raras", and which he shouts out in various keys, may be interpreted as follows: "How glad I am to be alive ... ta-ra! ta-ra!.. My bowels are elastic ... ra-ta-ta-ta-ra-ri... The juices are flowing correctly inside me ... ra-ta-ta-do-ta-ta... Contract, bowels, contract ... tram-ba-ba-boom!"

In the mornings when he passes me by (I pretend to be asleep) on his way from the bedroom to the door leading to the entrails of the apartment, where the lavatory is, my imagination races after him. I can hear him stomping about in the lavatory, which is cramped for his huge body. His back rubs against the inside of the door he has slammed shut, his elbows jab against the walls, and he shuffles from one foot to the other. The lavatory door has an opaque, oval pane of glass in it. When he flicks the switch, the oval glass lights up from within and becomes a beautiful opalescent egg. In my mind's eye I can see this egg suspended in the darkness of the corridor.

He weighs a good fifteen stone. Recently, as he was going downstairs somewhere, he noticed his breasts wobbling in time with his steps, and so he decided to add on a new set of exercises.

He is a perfect specimen of a man.

He usually does his exercises not in his bedroom but in the room of undefined function I am staying in. Here it is more spacious and airy, lighter, brighter. Cool air flows in through the open balcony door. What's more there's a wash-basin here.

A mat is carried in from the bedroom. He is stripped to the waist and wearing jersey under-pants fastened by a single button in the middle of his stomach. The blue and pink world of the room spins round in the mother-of-pearl lens of the button. When he lies down on his back on the mat and starts lifting one leg, then the other, the button pops open. His groin is bared. He has a superb groin. A silky pouch. A secret garden. The groin of a sire. I once saw just such a creamy, velvet groin on a male antelope. Girls, secretaries and office women of his must feel tingling sensations of love at his mere glance.

He washes like a little boy — trumpeting, hopping about, snorting and hollering. He scoops up handfuls of water and, before getting it as far as his armpits, splashes it all over the mat. Full clear drops scatter over the raffia. The foam dripping into the basin swells like a pancake. Sometimes the soap blinds him — then, cursing, he scrubs his eyelids with his thumbs. He makes a shrill sound gargling. People stop under the balcony and crane their necks.

It is the rosiest and quietest of mornings. Spring is at its height. There are flower boxes on all the window-sills. Through the gaps in the wood you catch glimpses of the cinnabar of the next flowering.

(Things don't like me. Furniture tries to trip me up. Once the corner of some polished

piece actually bit me. I have always had a tricky relationship with my blanket. Soup set in front of me never cools. When a knick-knack — a coin or cufflink — falls off the table, it usually rolls under some piece of furniture which is hard to move. And when I scramble about the floor and look up, I spot the sideboard laughing at me.)

His dark-blue braces hang at his sides. He goes into his bedroom, picks his pince-nez off a chair, puts it on in front of the mirror and comes back into my room. Here, standing right in the middle of the room, he lifts his braces, both at once, just as though he were heaving a load onto his shoulders. He does not say a word to me. I pretend to be asleep. In the metal clips of his braces two fiery balls of sunlight are concentrated. (Things like him.)

He does not need to comb his hair or tidy his beard and moustache. He keeps his hair cropped and his moustache short and trim. He looks just like a fat overgrown boy.

He picks up a bottle; the glass stopper rattles. He pours eau de cologne onto his palm and runs it over the sphere of his head, from his forehead to the nape of his neck and back again.

In the mornings he drinks two glasses of cold milk: he takes a small jug out of the sideboard, pours it out and drinks it standing up.

My first impression of him was stunning. I could never have imagined anything of the sort. He stood before me in an elegant grey suit, smelling of eau de cologne. His lips were fresh-looking, slightly pouted. He was, it appeared, a dandy.

Very often at night I am awakened by his snoring. Half-asleep, I cannot work out what

is going on. It is as though someone were saying over and over again in a menacing tone: "Cracatoi... Crra... ca... toiii..."

He has been given a wonderful apartment. And what a wonderful vase there is standing on a laquered whatnot by the balcony door! A vase of the finest porcelain, rounded, tall, with a delicate blood-red glow. It reminds me of a flamingo. The apartment is on the second floor. The balcony is suspended in an ethereal space. The wide suburban street is like a highway. Opposite is a garden, heavy with trees, typical of the outlying districts of Moscow; a jumbled assortment of trees which have grown up on an empty wasteland, and are hemmed in by three walls.

He is a glutton. He lunches out. Last night he came home hungry and decided to have a snack. As there was nothing in the sideboard, he went downstairs (to the corner shop) and came back laden with a huge pile of things: half a pound of ham, a tin of sprats, a tin of bream, a large white loaf, a good half moon of Dutch cheese, four apples, a dozen eggs and Persian crystallized fruit drops. He ordered fried eggs and tea (the kitchen in the house is communal and two cooks take turns to prepare the meals).

"Tuck in, Kavalarov," he urged me and tucked in himself. He ate the fried eggs straight from the pan, pulling away bits of the white like you chip away enamel. His eyes grew bloodshot, he kept removing and putting his pince-nez back on again, smacking his lips, breathing heavily and wagging his ears.

I enjoy observing things. Have you ever noticed that salt falls off the tip of a knife without

leaving a mark — and the knife looks as good as new; that a pince-nez rides over the bridge of a nose like a bicycle; that man is surrounded by little signs, a disturbed, teeming anthill of little signs: on forks, spoons, plates, pince-nez frames, buttons, pencils? Nobody notices them. They are engaged in a struggle for existence. They evolve from one type to another, until they become huge letters on signboards! They arise — one class versus another — the letters on street signs wage war against those on billboards.

He completely stuffed himself. He reached for the apples with a knife, split open the yellow cheek of one but then put it down again.

In a speech a People's Commissar once sung his praises thus:

"Andrei Babichev," he said, "is one of the state's outstanding people."

He, Andrei Petrovich Babichev, is the director of a food industry trust. He is a great salami-maker, confectioner and chef.

And I, Nikolai Kavalеров, am his fool.

II

He deals with everything to do with grub.

He is mean and jealous. He would like to cook all the omelettes, pies, rissoles and bake all the bread himself. He would like to create food. He has created the Quarter.

His offspring is growing. The Quarter is going to be a huge place with the greatest canteen ever, and the greatest kitchen ever. A two-course meal there will cost twenty-five copecks, a quarter.

War has been declared on kitchens.

At least a thousand of them will be conquered.

He is going to put an end to small-scale catering, to the sale of small portions of food and tots of alcohol. He is going to amalgamate all the meat-mincers, primuses, frying pans... If you like, call it the industrialization of canteens.

He has set up a series of commissions. The Soviet-made vegetable-peeling machines have proved first-class. A German engineer is building the kitchen. Babichev's orders are being carried out at many enterprises.

I have discovered this about him:

One morning he, a trust director, with a briefcase tucked under his arm — a citizen with a very respectable, obviously statesman-like bearing — went into a most “charming” back entrance, up an unfamiliar staircase, and banged on the first door he came to. Like Harun-al-Rashid, he visited the kitchen of a house occupied by workers on the outskirts. He saw soot and grime and mad furies rushing about in the smoke, children crying. They all flew at him at once. He was getting in everyone's way, so huge he was, he had taken away from them a lot of space, light and air. What's more, he had a briefcase and a pince-nez, was elegantly dressed and clean. And the furies decided he must, of course, be a member of some commission or other. With arms akimbo, the housewives gave him a piece of their minds. He left. Thanks to him (they shouted after him) the primus stove had gone out, a glass had been smashed and the soup over-salted. He left without saying what he had meant to. He has no imagination. What he ought to have said was this:

“Woman! We will blow the soot off you, rid your nostrils of smoke and your ears of all this din, we’ll make the spuds peel themselves, magically, in the twinkling of an eye, we’ll give you back the hours stolen from you by your kitchen — you’ll get back half your lives. You, young wife, are making soup for your husband. And for that puddle of a soup you’re giving up half your day! We will turn your puddles into sparkling seas, we’ll get your cabbage soup to flow like an ocean, your porridge heaped in mountains, and your fruit jellies sliding forth like glaciers. Listen, housewives, wait! We promise you: tiled floors bathed in sunlight, blazing copper pans, dazzling lily-white plates, milk, thick as mercury, and soup with such a delicious aroma that the flowers on the table will be jealous.”

Like a fakir, he can be in a dozen places at once.

In official notes he uses lots of brackets and underlined words because he is afraid of being misunderstood and interpreted wrongly.

Here are some examples:

“To Comrade Prokudin!

“Make the sweet wrappers (12 types) informative for the consumer (explain the kind of chocolate, fillings etc.) but with new designs. Don’t use Rosa Luxemburg. (I found some marshmallow already called that!!) Best, use some scientific name (with a poetic ring — from geography or astronomy?). A serious, attractive-sounding name like Eskimo? Telescope? Phone me without fail tomorrow, Wednesday, between one and two, at the office.”

"Comrade Fominsky!

"See to it that every plate of soup (both the 50- and the 75-copeck lunch) has a piece of meat in it (neatly cut up like *in a private restaurant*). Keep a constant eye on this. Is it true that: 1) the beer snacks are served without trays? 2) the peas are small and badly soaked?"

He's petty-minded, distrustful and fussy as an old housekeeper.

At ten in the morning he came back from the cardboard factory. Eight people were waiting to see him. He received: 1) a manager of a meat-and fish-smoking shop, 2) a representative of the Far Eastern Tinning Trust (he grabbed a tin of crabs and went rushing out of his office to show it to someone, then came back, put it down at his elbow and kept excitedly glancing at the blue tin, chortling and scratching his nose), 3) an engineer from the building site of a new warehouse, 4) a German about lorries (they spoke in German; he must have ended their conversation with a proverb because it rhymed and they both laughed), 5) an artist with a sketch for a poster (he did not like it and said that the blue in it must be a chemical and not a romantic blue), 6) a restaurant manager with cufflinks shaped like small milky-white bells, 7) a puny little man with a curly beard who spoke about head of cattle, and, finally, 8) a villager — a delightful character. This last meeting was very special. Babichev stood up and moved forwards, his arms almost outstretched. The other man filled the whole office — he was so wonderfully clumsy, shy, good-natured, suntanned, bright-eyed,

a sort of Levin out of Tolstoy. He smelled of wild flowers and dairy produce. When they started speaking of state farms, a dreamy expression appeared on the faces of all those present.

At four-twenty he set off for a meeting at the Supreme Council of the National Economy.

III

He sits at home in the evenings, overshadowed by a palm-green lampshade, in front of sheets of paper, notebooks, small sheets with columns of figures. He flicks through the pages of his desk calendar, jumps up, hunts through a shelf, takes down stacks of papers, kneels on the chair, his stomach on the desk, his fat face propped on his hands, and reads. On top of the desk's green surface is a sheet of glass. So what's so special about all that? A man working, a man working at home in the evening. A man, staring at a sheet of paper, stabbing about in his ear with a pencil. Nothing special. It's just that everything about him says: you're a Philistine, Kavalero. Of course, he does not actually say it. But it is clear without words. Someone else tells me. Someone else makes my blood boil as I watch him.

"The Quarter! The Quarter! That's it!" he shouts. "The Quarter!"

He suddenly starts chuckling. He has spotted something hilariously funny in the papers or columns of figures. He calls me over, choking with laughter. He roars, jabs at the sheet with his finger. I look and see nothing. What has amused him so? I cannot even see the points in question which may be compared, whereas he sees such

a discrepancy between them that he is splitting his sides laughing. I listen to him in horror. He is laughing like a high priest. I listen to him as a blind man would to a rocket exploding.

"You're a Philistine, Kavalеров. You don't understand a thing."

He does not say this but it is clear without words.

Sometimes he does not get home until late evening. Then I get instructions over the telephone:

"Is that Kavalеров? Look here, Kavalеров! I'm expecting a call from the Bread Trust. Get them to call me at 2-73-05, extension 62, jot it down. Got it? Extension 62, Central Food Board. Bye."

Sure enough, the call comes through from the Bread Trust.

"Is that the Bread Trust?" I check. "Comrade Babichev is at the Central Food Board... What? At the Central Food Board, 2-73-05. Extension 62. Got it? Extension 62, the Central Food Board. Bye."

The Bread Trust is calling Trust Director Babichev. Babichev is at the Central Food Board. What has it got to do with me? But I derive pleasure from taking an indirect part in the affairs of the Bread Trust and Babichev. I get a thrill out of being an administrator. But, in fact, my role in it all is negligible. That of a toady. So, what is it? Do I respect him? Am I afraid of him? No. I reckon I am no worse than him. I am not a Philistine. I'll prove it.

I want to catch him out, find his weak spot, his Achilles' heel. When I saw him for the first time performing his morning ablutions, I felt

sure that I had caught him, broken through his impenetrable defences.

Rubbing himself down, he came out of his bedroom towards the balcony door and, poking the corner of his towel in his ears, turned his back to me. When I caught sight of this back, this corpulent torso from behind, in the sunlight, I nearly uttered a cry. His back gave everything away. His soft, tender skin was a delicate yellow. The scroll of another man's life was unrolled before me. Babichev's distant forebear had taken care of his skin: his forebear's folds of fat were gently distributed over his body. The commissar had inherited fine skin of a noble colouring and pure pigmentation. And what really thrilled me most of all was that on his spine I spotted a mole, a special, hereditary, aristocrat's mole — a delicate little thing, full of blood, translucent, raised off his body by a stalk, just the kind which mothers recognise their stolen children by years later.

"You're an aristocrat, Andrei Petrovich! You're an imposter!" I nearly blurted out.

But then he turned his chest round towards me.

On his chest, under his right collarbone, was a scar. A round, slightly puckered scar, like the impression of a coin on wax. It was as though there had been a branch growing in this spot which had then been cut off. Babichev had done hard labour. He had tried to escape and had been shot at.

"Who's Jocasta?" he asked me once, without rhyme or reason. Strange, unexpected questions

issue from him (especially in the evenings). He is busy the rest of the day. But his eyes slide over posters, shop windows, and the corners of his ears catch words from other people's conversations. He absorbs raw material. I am the only person he does not talk shop to. He feels a need to start up a conversation but considers me incapable of holding a serious discussion. He knows that people usually chat when they are relaxing. He decides to recognise certain human customs. Then he asks me futile questions. I reply. I am his fool. He thinks I am a fool.

"Do you like olives?" he asks.

"Yes, I do know who Jocasta is! Yes, I do like olives but I don't want to answer foolish questions. I don't consider myself any more stupid than you." That's what I ought to reply to him. But I don't dare. He stifles me.

IV

I have been living under his roof for two weeks. Two weeks ago he picked me up drunk one night on the steps of a bar...

I had been kicked out.

The row had started gradually. To begin with, there had been no signs of a row brewing — on the contrary, a friendship could have sprung up between the two tables; drunks are a sociable lot; the large party the woman was sitting with invited me to join them, and I was just going to take up their invitation when the woman, a charming, slim creature wearing a dark-blue silk blouse draped loosely over her collarbones, cracked a joke about me — and I took umbrage,

and half-way there, turned back to my table, carrying my mug of beer ahead of me like a lantern.

My retreat was followed by a whole torrent of jokes. In fact, with my shaggy hair I really must have looked an odd fish. A man roared after me in a deep bass. Peas came flying at me. I went round my table and turned to face them. Some of my beer spilled onto the marble top, I could not free my thumb from the mug handle. Boozed, I launched into a tirade; self-abasement and arrogance were fused in one bitter stream:

“You ... are a band of monsters ... a travelling band of creeps who have kidnapped a girl...” (The people around pricked their ears up; the shaggy-haired man had a queer way of expressing himself; what he was saying struck an odd note among the general hubbub.) “You there, sitting on the right under the little palm, you’re creep number one. Stand up and show yourself to everyone... Have a look, comrades, most respected public... Quiet! Orchestra, strike up a waltz! A tuneful neutral kind of waltz! Your face is like an ox and a cart. Your cheeks are pulled back by wrinkles, and they’re not wrinkles really but reins; your chin is the ox; your nose — the cartman, a leper to boot, and the rest of your face is the load being carried along... Sit down. Next: creep number two... The man whose cheeks look like knees... Just fine! Admire, citizens, this band of creeps, here on tour... And what about you? How did you get through this door? How come your ears didn’t get tangled up? And you there, huddled against the kidnapped girl, ask her what she thinks of your blackheads. Comrades...” (I turned right and left) “They,

this lot here, were laughing at me! That one over there was laughing... D'you know what your laugh sounded like. It sounded just like a hollow wind-bag... Girl...

*"In gardens spring-adorned;
Queen, thou art more lovely than a rose;
Let thine eighteen years be warned;
Upon thee cometh foes!..*

"Girl! Scream! Shout for help! We will save you. What is the world coming to? He is pawing you, and you're just cringing? Do you like it?" (I paused and then said triumphantly) "I'm calling to you. Sit here with me. Why were you laughing at me? I'm standing before you, stranger that you are to me, and beseeching you: don't lose me. Just stand up, push them away and walk over here. What do you expect from him, from them all?.. What?.. Tenderness? Wit? Affection? Loyalty? Come to me. I find it ludicrous even comparing myself to them. You will receive infinitely more from me..."

So I spoke, horrified by what I was saying. I suddenly recalled those special dreams in which you know it is all a dream and you do as you please, knowing you'll wake up. But here it was obvious I was not going to wake up. A tangled ball of misunderstanding was gathering at a frenzied speed. Things had gone past the stage when they could be set right.

They chucked me out.

I lay unconscious and then, coming to, said, "I call them and they don't come. I call this scum, and they don't come." (My words were addressed to all women at once.)

I lay face-down on a gutter grating. In the gutter whose air I was inhaling, there was a musty smell, a seething musty smell; in the gutter's black depths something was stirring, rubbish was living. As I fell, I caught sight of the gutter for an instant, and the memory of it directed the course of my dream. That memory condensed the anxiety and fear I had felt in the bar, the humiliation and dread of being punished; and in my dream it was woven into a plot involving a chase — I was running away, trying to escape — I strained myself to the limit, and the dream broke off.

I opened my eyes, quivering with joyful relief. But I was still not fully awake and I perceived this new state as a transition from one dream to another, and in this other dream the main role was played by my deliverer — the man who had rescued me from my pursuers, the one whose hands and coat sleeves I covered with kisses, imagining I was doing it in my sleep — the one whose neck I embraced, sobbing bitterly.

"Why am I so miserable?.. How hard life is for me!" I murmured.

"Hold his head higher," said my saviour.

I was being driven in a car. Coming to, I saw a sky, a pale sky, growing lighter; it rushed from the soles of my feet to somewhere at the back of my head. This dream rumbled, made me dizzy and ended each time in a bout of nausea. When I awoke the next morning, I anxiously stretched my hand down to my feet. Before I had worked out where I was or what had happened to me, I remembered the jolts and bumps. I was struck by the thought that I had been taken off by ambulance, and that while I was drunk, I lost both legs in an accident. I stretched out my hand

certain that I would find a thick barrel-like stump of bandages where my legs had once been. But it all appeared quite simple: I was lying on a sofa in a large, clean, light room with a balcony and two windows. It was early morning. The stone of the balcony was gently warming up and beginning to glow pink.

When we got acquainted in the morning, I told him about myself.

"You looked pathetic," he said. "I felt very sorry for you. Perhaps you're offended and reckon I'm sticking my nose in someone else's business? If so, please forgive me. But if you'd like to, you can stay here with me for a while and lead a normal life. I'll be only too pleased. There's plenty of space. Light and air. And there's work for you here, too: a bit of proof-reading, selecting of materials. How about it?"

What made this famous man stoop so low before a perfect stranger, and a suspicious-looking one at that?

V

I found out two secrets in one evening. "Andrei Petrovich, who's that in the framed picture?" I asked.

There is a picture of a dark-complexioned young man on his desk.

"What?" he always asks you to repeat your question. His thoughts get stuck to his papers and cannot be torn away immediately. "What?" But he is still miles away.

"Who is this young man?"

"Oh... That's someone called Volodya Ma-

karov. A remarkable young man." (He never speaks normally to me. It's as though I can't ask him about anything serious. I always expect him to reply with a proverb, or a rhyming couplet, or simply with some incoherent mumbling. Now, too, instead of saying in an ordinary way "a remarkable young man", he declaims, almost chants "re-mark-ab-le!")

"What's so remarkable about him?" I ask, avenged by my resentful tone.

But he does not notice my resentment.

"Nothing really. He's just a young man. A student. You're sleeping on his sofa," he says. "You see, he's like a son to me. He's lived with me for ten years. Volodya Makarov. He left recently. Went to his Dad's in Murom."

"Oh, I see..."

"Yes..."

He gets up from his desk and starts walking about.

"He's eighteen years old. He's a famous footballer."

("Oh, a footballer," I think.)

"Well," I say, "that really is remarkable! Being a famous footballer really is something." ("What am I saying?")

He does not hear. He is lost in blissful thought. From the balcony door he gazes far into the sky. He is thinking about Volodya Makarov.

"He's quite unique, that youngster is," he suddenly says, turning towards me. (I can see he finds it offensive having me around when he is thinking about Volodya Makarov.) "First of all, I owe him my life. He saved me from being killed ten years ago. They were going to put my head on a forge and strike my face with a ham-

mer. He saved me.” (He enjoys speaking about the young man’s feat. Evidently, he often recalls it.) “But that’s not the main thing. What is, is that he is a completely new sort of person. Oh well, never mind.” (And he goes back to his desk.)

“Why did you pick me up and bring me here?”

“What? Mmm?” He grunts. Only a second later will the meaning of my question sink in. “Why did I bring you here? You were a sorry sight. It was impossible not to pity you. You were sobbing. I felt dreadfully sorry for you.”

“But what about the sofa?”

“What about the sofa?”

“When your young man comes back...”

Without a moment’s hesitation he replies simply and cheerfully:

“Then you’ll have to vacate the sofa...”

I ought to get up and smash his face in. He pitied me, you see, he, a celebrity, decided to take under his wing an unhappy young man who had come unhinged. But only for a while. Until number one comes back. He’s simply bored in the evenings. But then he’ll kick me out. He speaks of this with cynicism.

“Andrei Petrovich,” I say. “Do you realise what you’ve said? You’re a brute!”

“What? Mmm?” His thoughts tear themselves away from the paper. Now his hearing will repeat my question to him, and I implore fate to make his hearing get it wrong. He hasn’t heard, has he? Oh well, let him, at least we’ll get things straight.

But an external circumstance intervenes. I am not destined to be thrown out of this house yet.

From under the balcony in the street outside someone calls out: "Andreil!"

He turns his head.

"Andreil"

He stands up sharply, pushing himself away from the desk with his hand.

"Andreil, old chap!"

He goes out onto the balcony. I move towards the window. We both look down onto the street. It is dark. The road is lit up only by the occasional window. In the middle of it stands a small broad-shouldered man.

"Good evening, Andreil. How are things? How's the Quarter?"

(Through the window I can see the balcony and Andreil's huge silhouette. And I can hear that he is breathing heavily.)

The man in the street continues in an enthusiastic voice, only a little more quietly:

"Why are you keeping quiet? I've come to tell you some news. I've invented a machine. It's called Ophelia."

Babichev turns quickly. His shadow strikes sideways across the street and nearly causes a storm in the foliage of the garden opposite. He sits down at his desk. He drums his fingers against the glass top.

"Watch out, Andreil!" the voice calls out. "Don't get carried away! I'll finish you, Andreil..."

Then Babichev jumps up again and flies onto the balcony with his fists clenched. The trees rage properly now. His shadow descends upon the town like a Buddha.

"Who are you fighting, you wretch?" he says. Then the railings shudder. He bangs them with his fist. "Who are you fighting, you wretch?"

Clear off. I'll have you arrested!"

"Good-bye!" comes the reply from down below.

The fat little man takes off his hat, stretches out his arm and waves the hat (is it a bowler? It looks like a bowler.). His politeness is affected. Andrei is already gone from the balcony. With quick short steps the little man walks off down the middle of the street.

"There you are!" Babichev shouts at me. "There, have a good look. That's my dear brother, Ivan. What a bastard!"

He paces the room, fuming. And again he shouts at me:

"Who is he — Ivan? Who? A layabout, a harmful, dangerous man. He ought to be shot!"

(The dark-complexioned young man in the picture is smiling. He has a common face. He shows off his sparkling teeth in a special, masculine sort of way, displaying a whole sparkling cageful of them like an Oriental.)

VI

Evening. He is working. I am sitting on the sofa. The lamp is between us. The lampshade (from where I am) destroys the upper part of his face — it's gone. Hanging underneath the lampshade is the lower hemisphere of his head. All in all, it looks like a painted clay piggy-bank.

"I was born at the dawn of a new century," I say.

He is not listening. His indifference to me is insulting.

"I often think of the century. Our century

is a great one. And that's a wonderful destiny, isn't it? When a man is born at the dawn of a new century."

His hearing reacts to rhythms. As a serious-minded person he finds rhythms amusing!

"Born, dawn!" he repeats. (But tell him he has just heard and repeated two words, and he won't believe you.)

"In Europe a talented person has plenty of scope for winning acclaim. There they like other people to become famous. Do anything remarkable you like and you'll be swept off your feet and carried along the path to fame... Here there's no way for an individual to achieve success. It's true, isn't it?"

I might just as well be talking to myself. I make noises, utter words — well, go on, that's fine. My noises don't seem to bother him.

"In our country the roads to fame are barred... A talented man either has to lose his shine or risk a furore by lifting the bar. Take me, for instance, I like arguing. I want to display my individuality. I want fame of my very own. Here in this country everybody is afraid to pay particular attention to one person. I want lots of attention. I would like to have been born in a small French town, to have grown up day-dreaming, to have set myself some lofty goal and then one day to have set off on foot for the capital and there, by working like mad, to have achieved my goal. But I was not born in the West. Now I am told: not just you — even the most remarkable personality — is of no importance. And I'm gradually beginning to get used to this truth, which is disputable. I even think like this: well, you can win fame by, say, becoming

a musician, writer, army general, by crossing the Niagara Falls on a tightrope — these are all legitimate ways of winning fame, here the individual tries to show his worth. But now just imagine when there's so much talk here about being purposeful and useful and when you are expected to have a sober, realistic attitude to things and events if you were suddenly to go and do something totally eccentric, pull off some absolutely brilliant stunt and say afterwards: 'You do it your way, I do it mine!' Go out into a public square, do something with yourself and say, bowing, 'I have lived and done exactly what I pleased.'"

He hears not a word.

"Or just go and do something like kill yourself. A suicide without a motive. Just for fun. To show that everyone has the right to do whatever they like with themselves. Even now. Say, hang myself under your balcony."

"Better still, hang yourself under the entrance to the Supreme Council of the National Economy in Varvarskaya, I mean, what's it called now — Nogin Square. There's a huge archway. Know where I mean? There it would look impressive."

The room I lived in before moving here had a terrible bed. I feared it like I do ghosts. It was curved like a barrel. Your bones cracked in it. It was covered with a blue blanket I had bought at Kharkov's Blagoveshchenski Market in a year of famine. A woman was selling pies. They were covered with a blanket. Cooling down but still emitting life's warmth, they were all but squeaking under the blanket and wriggling like puppies. Just then I was having a tough time, like everyone else, and this scene radiated

such bliss, homeliness and warmth that I firmly made up my mind there and then to buy myself a blanket just like it. My dream came true. One lovely evening I slipped under a blue blanket. I boiled under it, tossed and turned, the warmth made me wobble like a jelly. It was divine falling asleep. But time went by and the blanket's patterns swelled and turned into knot-shaped biscuits.

Now I sleep on an excellent sofa.

By moving in a certain way I can make its taut, new, virginal springs vibrate. Separate droplets of sound come rippling from its depths. A picture is conjured of bubbles of air rushing to the surface of water. I fall asleep like a child. On the sofa I soar back into my childhood. I experience pure bliss. Like a child, I am able to control that tiny space of time between the first feeling of drooping eyelids, the first swimming sensation, and the beginnings of proper sleep. Once again I know how to prolong this space, relish it, fill it with the right thoughts, and before plunging into sleep, still controlling them with the help of my awake consciousness, I already see these thoughts acquiring a dream-like substance, these bubbles of sound rising from the underwater depths and turning into swiftly spinning grapes, then forming a heavy bunch of grapes, a whole fence densely hung with bunches, and a road along the vineyard, a sunny road, heat...

I am twenty-seven.

Once as I was changing my shirt, I caught sight of myself in the mirror and suddenly spotted a striking likeness to my father. We were not at all alike in fact. I remembered: my parents'

bedroom, and a little boy — myself — watching my father changing his shirt. I felt sorry for him. Now he could never be handsome or famous; he was already past it, finished; now he could never be anything else but what he already was. This was what I thought, pitying him, and secretly proud of my own superiority. And now I saw my father in me. It was a likeness of forms, no, I would say, it was more of a sexual likeness: as if I had suddenly become aware of my father's seed inside me, in my very substance. And it was as though someone were saying to me: you're past it. Finished. There will be nothing more. Have a son.

Now I shall never be handsome or famous. I shall never leave a little town for the capital. I shall never become a general or a People's Commissar or a scientist or a runner or a swindler. I have dreamed all my life of a special kind of love. Soon I will be going back to my old flat, to the room with the terrible bed. Back to my miserable companion — a widow called Prokopovich. She is about forty-five but everybody calls her Annie. She cooks meals for a hairdressers' salon. She has set up a kitchen in the corridor. The stove is in a dark corner. She feeds the cats. Stealthy, emaciated cats streak after her hands with galvanic speed. She tosses them some kind of offal. That's why the floor looks as though it is flecked with mother-of-pearl gobs of spit. Once I trod and slipped on a heart which was small and taut like a chestnut. She goes about entangled in cats and animals' guts. With a glinting knife in her hand, she rips guts apart with her elbows like a princess tearing a cobweb.

Widow Prokopovich is old, fat, and flabby. You can squeeze her out like a roll of liver sausage. In the mornings I used to bump into her by the wash-basin in the corridor. Half-dressed, she would smile at me in a *feminine* way. By her door stood a bowl on a stool with loose hairs floating in it.

Widow Prokopovich is a symbol of my humiliation as a man. The message is clear: please do, I'm ready, just pick the wrong door at night, I don't lock it on purpose, I'll have you. We'll live together and enjoy ourselves. But as for your dreams of a special kind of love — forget it! All that's finished. Take a good look at yourself, neighbour: you're fat and your trousers are too short for you. Well, what more do you need? That one there? The one with slender arms? The girl of your dreams? With a little egg-shaped face? Forget it! You're old enough to be her dad. So, how about it? I've got a marvellous bed. My late husband won it in a lottery. And a quilted blanket, too. I'll look after you. I'll be kind to you. How about it?

Sometimes her gaze was brazenly lewd. Sometimes when we met a small sound, a round vocal droplet, ejected by a spasm of delight, spilled from her throat.

I'm not that old, you filthy slag! I'm no match for you, you old bag!

I fall asleep on Babichev's sofa.

I dream that a lovely girl with a tinkling laugh is slipping under my sheet. My dreams are coming true. But how will I thank her? I become afraid. Nobody has ever loved me for nothing. Even

prostitutes have tried to rip me off as much as they could — so, what will she demand of me? As it happens in dreams, she reads my mind:

“Oh, don’t worry. Just a quarter.”

I recall years ago, as a schoolboy, being taken to a waxworks museum. Inside a glass cube a handsome man in a dinner jacket with a smouldering wound in his chest was dying in someone’s arms.

“This is the French President, Carnot, who was wounded by an anarchist,” my father explained.

The President was dying, breathing heavily, his eyelids fluttering. The President’s life slipped slowly away like sand in an hour-glass. I stared at him spellbound. The splendid man was lying with his head thrown back, in a green-tinted cube. It was a wonderful sight. It was then that I first heard the roar of time. Past ages rushed over me. I gulped back tears of delight. I decided then to become famous so that one day my wax double, filled with the beat of the centuries, which only a few are privileged to hear, might also stand inside a green-tinted cube.

Just now I am writing a programme for a variety show, containing monologues and limericks about revenue inspectors, our toffee-nosed young ladies, our new kind of businessmen and alimony:

*The whole office is full of hum-dum,
Everyone’s gone crazy, to a man.
You see, our secretary Liza Kaplan,
Has been given a big, big brass drum!*

But, who knows, maybe some day in a huge waxworks museum there will stand a wax figure of a strange man with a thick nose, a pale good-natured face, tousled hair, boyishly chubby, in a jacket with only one button left on his paunch; and on the cube there will be a small plaque saying:

NIKOLAI KAVALEROV

And nothing else. That's all. And everyone who sees it will say: "Oh!" And they'll remember various stories, possibly, legends: "Oh, that's the man who lived at a famous time, hated and envied everyone, boasted, put on airs, was tormented by great plans, wanted to do much and did nothing — and ended up committing a horrendous, foul crime..."

VII

I turned off Tverskaya Street into a side-street. I had to get to Nikitskaya Street. It was early morning. This side-street was full of joints. Like painful rheumatism, I moved from one joint to the next. Things don't like me. The side-street is suffering from me.

A small man in a bowler hat was walking ahead of me.

At first I thought he was in a hurry, but soon I realised that the impetuous way he walked, pushing his whole body forward, was characteristic of him in general.

He was holding onto the corner of a large pillow in a yellow cover. It kept bumping against

his knee, causing dents to appear and then disappear in it.

Sometimes in a side-street in the city centre, one comes across a romantic flowering hedge. Just now we were walking along such a hedge.

A bird on a branch flashed, started and clicked, rather like a hair clipper. The man walking ahead glanced round at the bird. Walking behind, I managed to catch sight of only the first phase, the crescent moon, of his face. He was smiling.

"It does sound like one, doesn't it?" I nearly exclaimed, sure that he too must have spotted the similarity.

The bowler hat.

He took it off and carried it, hugging it like a round Easter cake. His other hand had the pillow.

The windows were open. In one, on the first floor, you could see a small dark-blue vase with a flower in it. The vase attracted the little man. He stepped off the pavement, went out into the middle of the road and stopped under the window with his head raised. His bowler hat had slipped to the back of his head. He clung tightly to the pillow. Down was already blossoming on his knee.

I watched from behind a projection.

"Valya!" he called to the small vase.

Instantly the vase was knocked over and a girl in something pink appeared in a flurry at the window.

"Valya," he said, "I've come for you."

There was silence. Water from the small vase ran onto the ledge.

"Look what I've brought... See?" (He lifted

the pillow in both hands above his stomach.) "Recognise it? You used to sleep on it." (He laughed.) "Come back to me, Valya. Don't you want to? I'll show you Ophelia. Don't you want to?"

Again there was silence. The girl lay prone on the window-sill, her head and tousled hair hanging down. The vase was rolling about beside her. I recalled that a moment after she had appeared, and just after she had spotted him standing in the street, the girl had already leaned her elbows on the window-sill, and now her elbows gave way.

There were clouds moving across the sky, and their paths got entangled both over and in the window panes.

"I beg you, Valya, come back! Just run down the stairs."

He waited.

Some idlers stopped to watch.

"So you don't want to? Oh well, good-bye then."

He turned, straightened his bowler and walked off down the middle of the side-street towards me.

"Wait! Wait, Dad! Dad! Dad!"

He walked faster, broke into a run. Past me. I saw he was no longer young. He was short of breath and pale from running. A rather comic-looking, chubby man was running with a pillow clutched to his breast. But there was nothing insane about it.

The window became empty.

She tore after him. She ran as far as the corner where the deserted side-street ended: she did not find him. I remained standing by the

hedge. The girl came back. I stepped towards her. Thinking that I knew something and could help her, she stopped. A tear meandered down her cheek as it would down a vase. She was tensed up, ready to ask me something excitedly but I interrupted her with:

"You swept past me like a bough full of flowers and leaves."

That evening I was proof-reading:

"...Thus, the blood collected during the slaughter of livestock may be processed either into food, for making salami, or for making light-coloured and black albumin, glue, buttons, paints, fertilizers, and fodder for livestock, fowl and fish. The raw fat of any kind of livestock and fat-containing organic waste products may be used in the preparation of edible fats such as lards, margarine, synthetic butter, and fats for industrial use such as stearine, glycerine and machine oils. The mutton heads and legs, by means of electrical spiral drills, automatic cleaning machines, gas singeing machines, cutters and scalding drums, may be processed into food products, industrial grease; the cleaned hair and bones of various sorts..."

He was talking on the telephone. He gets about ten calls during an evening. How should I know who he was speaking to just then? But all of a sudden I caught him say:

"That's not cruel."

I started listening.

"That's not cruel. You ask me, so I'm telling you. That's not cruel. No, no! You can rest assured of that. Do you hear me?" "He's humiliating himself? What? He was walking under your windows?" "Don't trust him. He's

up to his old tricks. He walked under my windows too. He likes walking under other people's windows. I know him." "What? Ah? You've been crying? All evening? Well, you shouldn't have cried all evening." "He'll go mad? We'll send him to an institution then. Ophelia? Who? Oh... Forget it. Ophelia's a load of poppycock." "As you like. But if you ask me, you're doing the right thing." "Yes, yes." "What? A pillow? No, really?" (A chuckle.) "I can imagine. What? What? The one you slept on? So what." "What? Every pillow has a history of its own. In a word, you needn't have any qualms about that. What's that?" "Yes, yes!" (Then he paused and listened for a long time. I was sitting on tenterhooks. He burst out laughing.) "A bough? What? What bough? Full of flowers? Flowers and leaves? What? It must have been one of the drunks he's chums with."

VIII

Imagine an ordinary piece of boiled salami: a thick, smooth, round chunk, cut off the end of a large, heavy roll. One end, whose wrinkled skin is tied in a knot, has a little string tail hanging from it. Just an ordinary piece of salami, nothing more. It probably weighs just over a kilo. It has a sweaty surface and little yellowish bubbles of fat under its skin. Where it has been sliced off, the same fat forms a pattern of white dots.

Babichev was holding the salami in his palm and speaking. The doors kept opening. People kept coming in. It grew crowded. The salami hung down from Babichev's stately pink hand like a living thing.

"Isn't it grand?" he asked everyone present collectively. "No, just look at it... It's a pity Shapiro isn't here. We must get him over here. Ha-ha. Grand! Have you phoned Shapiro? It was engaged? Try again..."

Then the salami was put on the table. Babichev lovingly laid it on a napkin. Then, backing away and keeping his eyes glued to it, he found a chair with his bottom and sat down, leaned his fists on his thighs and began roaring with laughter. Then he lifted a fist, spotted some fat on it and licked it off.

"Kavalerov!" (After he had stopped laughing.) "Are you free right now? Go over to Shapiro, please. To the storehouse. Know where I mean? Go straight to him and take it along." (He pointed to the salami with his eyes.) "Take it and let him have a look and phone me."

I took the salami to Shapiro at the storehouse while Babichev phoned all over the place.

"Yes, yes," he bellowed. "Yes! It's absolutely fantastic! We'll send it to an exhibition. We'll send it to Milan! Yes, it's just what we wanted! Yes, yes! Seventy per cent veal. It's a great triumph... No, not fifty kopecks, don't be daft... Fifty kopecks! Oh no! Thirty-five a kilo. Isn't it grand? It's magnificent!"

He drove off.

His laughing, crimson, pot-like face swayed in the car window. Sweeping past, he shoved his porkpie hat into the doorman's hand, and, his eyes bulging, ran up the stairs, massive, noisy and violent like a wild boar. "Salami!" his voice

resounded in many offices. "Just what we wanted... I told you about it... It's fabulous!.." From each office, while I was still sauntering along the sunlit streets, he phoned Shapiro:

"It's on its way to you! Solomon, you'll see! You'll burst with envy..."

"Still hasn't arrived? Ha-ha, Solomon..."

He kept wiping his sweaty face, shoving the handkerchief deep inside his collar, almost tearing it to shreds, scowling, fretting.

I arrived at Shapiro's. Everyone saw me carrying the salami, and they all made way for me. The way was magically cleared. They all knew that the messenger with Babichev's salami had arrived. Shapiro, a melancholic old Jew whose nose from the side looked like a figure six, was standing in the storehouse's yard, under a wooden awning. The door, through which wavering summer darkness loomed like in all open doors of storehouses (it was the kind of fragile and chaotic darkness you see before your eyes when you cover and press your eyelids with your fingertips), led into an enormous shed. Hanging by the door-post outside was a telephone. Beside it some yellow sheets of documents were nailed to the wall.

Shapiro took the piece of salami from me, sized up its weight, rocked it in his palm (rocking his head at the same time), brought it up to his nose, and sniffed it. Then he came out from under the awning, put the salami down on a crate and with a penknife carefully sliced off a tiny soft slither. In total silence the slither was chewed, pressed against his pallet, sucked and slowly swallowed. The hand holding onto the penknife was lowered, quivering: the owner of the hand

was absorbed in his sensations.

"My," he sighed, after he had swallowed it. "Well done, Babichev. What a salami he's made. Yes, he's really done it. Thirty-five kopecks for such a salami — you know, that's quite incredible."

The telephone rang. Shapiro slowly got up and went to the door.

"Yes, Comrade Babichev. I congratulate you and I want to embrace you."

From wherever he was, Babichev was shouting so loudly that from where I stood, quite a way from the telephone, I could hear his voice, the crackling and reverberating sounds in the receiver. The receiver, shaken by the powerful vibrations, nearly rocketed out of Shapiro's weak fingers. He even waved his other hand at it, scowling, as you would at a naughty boy who was preventing you from listening.

"What shall I do?" I asked. "Is the salami going to stay here with you?"

"He asked for it to be brought home to him. He's invited me over in the evening to eat it."

I couldn't help blurting out:

"Do I really have to drag it all the way to his place? Wouldn't it be easier to buy another piece?"

"Such a piece, no," said Shapiro. "It's not in the shops yet. This is a factory sample."

"It'll go off."

Folding his penknife and slipping his hand down his side, feeling for his pocket, with a faint smile and drooping eyelids, Shapiro said slowly and, as old Jews are wont to, in a reproving tone:

"I congratulated Comrade Babichev on making a salami which will *not* go off in one day.

Otherwise I would not have congratulated Comrade Babichev. We shall eat it today. Put it in the sun, don't worry, in the hot sun, and it will still smell like a rose."

He vanished into the darkness of the shed, came back with some grease-proof paper, and a few seconds later I was holding a neatly made parcel.

From the very first days of my acquaintance with Babichev I had heard talk of the famous salami. Somewhere experiments were being carried out to make a special sort which would be nourishing, pure and cheap. Babichev was constantly making enquiries in various quarters; with a solicitous note in his voice he would ask and give out advice, and go away from the telephone either languorously or pleasantly excited. In the end the species was evolved. Out of the mysterious incubators, swaying its hefty trunk, slithered a fat, tightly packed tube.

When he was given a piece of this tube to hold, Babichev blushed deeply, and even looked bashful at first, like a bridegroom who has suddenly realised how fair his young bride is and how charming the guests find her. In happy confusion he glanced round at everyone and immediately put the piece down and backed away with his palms upturned, as if to say, "No, no. Don't. I'm saying 'no' straightaway so as not to suffer torments later. It is impossible for an ordinary mortal to have such luck. This is a dirty trick played by Fate. Take it away. I do not deserve it."

Carrying the kilo of wonderful salami, I strode along in an undefined direction.

I stopped on a bridge.

The Palace of Labour was on my left; the Kremlin behind. In the river there were boats, swimmers. From my bird's eye view I saw a tug-boat gliding swiftly by. From this altitude; though, what I saw was not a tug but something shaped like an enormous almond sliced in two lengthwise. The almond vanished under the bridge. Only then did I recall that the tug had a funnel and that somewhere near the funnel two people had been eating beetroot soup out of a pot. A white puff of smoke, transparent and diffuse, was wafting towards me. Failing to get as far as me, it dispersed and reached me only with its last wisp, coiling in a hardly visible astral hoop.

I felt like tossing the salami into the river.

This remarkable man, Andrei Babichev, a member of the Society of Tsarist Political Prisoners, a manager, considers this day a special occasion just because he has been shown a new type of salami... But is it really a special occasion? Is this really what fame is all about?

He was radiant today. Yes, the hallmark of distinction was clearly on him. So why don't I feel overjoyed, thrilled, overawed by this fame of his? Instead, I am seething with resentment. He is a leader, a Communist, he is building a new world. But fame in this new world comes in a flash when a new sort of salami is produced by a sausage-maker. I do not understand this sort of fame, what does it really mean? This is not the kind of fame I learnt about from biographies, monuments, history... So, the nature of fame has changed, then? Is this true of everywhere or only of this country where a new world is being constructed? But, you see, I feel that this new world being constructed here is the main one, the one

which will triumph... I'm not blind, my head's screwed on properly. I don't need to be taught or have things explained to me... I'm well-informed. It's namely here in this world that I want fame! I want to shine just like Babichev shone today. But a new sort of salami won't make me shine.

I wandered along the streets with the parcel. A piece of rotten salami was directing my movements, my will. I didn't want that!

Several times I felt like hurling the parcel over the railings. But I only had to imagine the deplorable piece of salami, losing its wrapper as it soared through the air, falling and disappearing into the waves like a torpedo, and I instantly saw another picture which set me shivering. I saw Babichev advancing upon me like a terrifying, unconquerable idol with bulging eyes. I am afraid of him. He oppresses me. He never looks at me but he sees right through me. He is not looking at me now. I can see his eyes only from the side when his face is turned towards me. I can't see his expression, only his glinting pince-nez — two round opaque disks. He is not interested in looking at me, he hasn't the desire to but I know he can see right through me.

In the evening Solomon Shapiro arrived, followed by two others, and Babichev put on a spread. The old Jew brought a bottle of vodka along, and they drank and sampled the famous salami. I declined from taking part in the feast. Instead, I watched them from the balcony.

Paintings have immortalized many feasts: feasts of army generals, doges and fat gourmands. Epochs have been captured by the fluttering feathery fans, cascading garments, glistening cheeks.

A new Tiepolo, that's who we need! Hurry here! Here are some feasting characters for you... They are seated around a table under a bright hundred-watt lamp, talking animatedly. Paint them, new Tiepolo, paint "Feast at the Manager's"!

I can see your canvas in a museum. I can see the visitors standing in front of your painting and racking their brains, trying to work out what the corpulent giant in dark-blue braces is talking about with such inspiration... His fork is poised with a piece of salami on the end of it. It is high time for the piece to have disappeared into the speaker's mouth, but this does not happen because the speaker is too engrossed in what he is saying. So, what is he talking about?

"In our country they don't know how to make sausages!" roars the giant in dark-blue braces. "Can you really call them sausages? You're keeping quiet, Solomon. You're Jewish, you don't understand anything about sausages, you like dried-up kosher meat... We don't have sausages... They're withered fingers, not sausages. Real sausages should be juicy. I'll have my way, you'll see, I'll make real sausages."

IX

We gathered together at the aerodrome.

I say "we"! I was an odd man out, someone brought along fortuitously. Nobody spoke to me, nobody was interested in my impressions. I might just as well have stayed at home.

A newly designed Soviet aircraft was going to be tried out, and Babichev had been invited

along. The guests walked past the barrier. Babi-chev was the key figure even in this select company. As soon as he started talking to someone, a circle formed around him. They all listened to him with reverential awe. He certainly looked grand in his well-tailored grey suit, a hulk of a man, his arched shoulders towering above all the others. Black binoculars on a strap hung on his stomach. As he listened to someone, he dug his hands into his pockets, and rocked gently to and fro on his wide-spread feet. He kept scratching his nose and then bringing his fingers right up to his eyes and looking at them bunched together. Without realising it, the others, like schoolboys, copied his gestures. They kept scratching their noses, much to their own surprise.

I stalked off to the buffet in a filthy mood and sat there, carressed by the breeze from the airfield, drinking beer. I sipped it, watching the breeze mould delicate patterns out of the ends of the tablecloth.

Many wonderful things were happening all at once on the airfield: ox-eye daisies were blooming very close to the barrier — ordinary ox-eye daisies, sprinkling yellow pollen; round clouds, which looked like cannon smoke, were rolling low across the horizon; here, too, wooden arrows painted the brightest red pointed in various directions; high up, the silky trunk of a wind indicator was swinging, contracting and billowing out; and here, too, across the grass, the green grass of old battles, roaming deer and romantics, crawled flying machines. I savoured the taste of these delightful contrasts and combinations. The rhythm of the silky hose's contractions was conducive to meditation.

Transparent, vibrant like the upper wing of an insect, since my childhood the name of Lilienthal has had a magic ring for me.... Ethereal, as though stretched across light bamboo canes, this name is connected in my memory with the first days of aviation. The flying man Otto Lilienthal was killed. Flying machines are no longer like birds. Their light, gleaming yellow wings have been replaced by fins. One might think they thud against the ground during take-off. At any rate, dust rises during take-off. The flying machine now looks like a heavy fish. How quickly aviation has become an industry.

A march struck up. The People's Commissar for War had arrived. He walked quickly up the path, overtaking his colleagues. The power and speed of his movements kicked up a wind. Leaves swirled behind him. The band played spritely, and the People's Commissar for War strode spritely along, perfectly in time with the band.

I rushed towards the gate leading onto the airfield but I was not allowed through. The soldier on duty said "halt" and put his hand on the gate's upper rib.

"How come?" I asked.

He turned away. His eyes sought out the place where the interesting events were happening. The pilot designer, in a crimson leather jacket, was standing to attention in front of the People's Commissar for War. A strap was tightly drawn across the latter's broad back. Both saluted. Everything became still. Only the band was in full swing. Babichev stood with his stomach sticking out.

"Let me through, Comrade!" I repeated,

touching the soldier by the sleeve.

"I'll have you removed from the aerodrome," he replied.

"But I was just there. I only left for a minute. I'm with Babichev!"

I had to show an invitation card. I did not have one: Babichev had simply taken me along with him. Of course, I would not have minded in the least if I had not got onto the airfield. Behind the barrier one also had an excellent vantage point. But I kept insisting. Something more important than simply the desire to see everything close at hand made me lose my cool. I suddenly became acutely aware of my not belonging to the people who had been brought together on account of this great and important event, of the total superfluity of my presence among them, of my alienation from everything important these people were doing here, on the airfield or anywhere else.

"Comrade, I'm not an ordinary citizen, you know," I exclaimed hotly (I couldn't have thought of a better way to try and untangle the jumble in my thoughts!). "Who do you think I am? A Philistine? Kindly let me through. I belong over there." (I waved at the group of people greeting the People's Commissar for War.)

"No, you don't," the soldier smiled.

"Ask Comrade Babichev!" I cupped my hands, stood on tiptoe and shouted:

"Andrei Petrovich!"

Just then the band stopped playing. The last drumbeat was vibrating like an underground rumbling.

"Comrade Babichev!"

He heard. The People's Commissar for War

turned round too. They all turned round. The pilot put his hand up to his helmet, stylishly shading his eyes from the sun.

I was terrorstruck. I was hovering behind the barrier; a paunchy man in trousers too small for him — how had I dared distract them? And when silence fell and when, still wondering who was calling to one of them, they froze in breathless suspense, I could not bring myself to call out again.

But he knew, he saw, he heard me calling to him. One second and it was all over. The members of the group reverted to their previous positions. I was on the verge of tears.

Then I stood on tiptoe again and through cupped hands sent a resounding howl in that forbidden direction, deafening the soldier:

“Sausage-maker!”

And again:

“Sausage-maker!”

And over and over again:

“Sausage-maker! Sausage-maker!”

I saw only him, Babichev, his porkpie hat rising above all the others. I remember longing to shut my eyes and squat down behind the fence. I cannot remember whether I shut my eyes but if I did, I still managed to see the most important part. Babichev's face was turned towards me. For one tenth of a second it was turned towards me. There were no eyes in it. Just the two dull disks of his pince-nez, glinting like mercury. The fear of some immediate reprisal reduced me to a state similar to sleep. I was dreaming. It seemed to me that I was asleep. And the most terrible part of this dream was that Babichev's head was turned towards me on an immobile body, swivel-

ling on its own axis, as though on a screw. His back remained unturned.

X

I left the aerodrome.

But the noisy, festive proceedings there still enticed me. I stopped on a green bank and stood, leaning against a tree, getting covered in dust. I was surrounded by leaves like a saint in a shrine. I broke off the tender bitter shoots and sucked them. I stood with my pale, good-natured face upturned and gazed at the sky.

The plane took off from the aerodrome. With a terrible purring it flew overhead, glinting yellow in the sunlight, oblique like a signboard, nearly slashing the leaves of my tree. Stamping about the bank, I followed it higher and higher: it swept away, now flashing, now turning black. As it moved further away, it assumed different shapes: a gun lock, a penknife, a trampled lilac blossom...

The new Soviet aircraft's take-off was celebrated without me. War had been declared. I had insulted Babichev.

Soon they would be tumbling out of the aerodrome's gates. The drivers were already getting ready. I looked towards Babichev's blue car. Alpers the driver saw me and made signs to me. I turned my back on him. My shoes got entangled in green noodles of grass.

I ought to have a word with him. He must understand. I ought to explain to him that it is he who is in the wrong, not me but him! He won't come out alone. I need to talk to him in private. From here he'll drive over to his office. I'll beat him to it.

There I was told he was at the construction site.

At the Quarter? So, I must go to the Quarter.

It was as though some evil force was driving me on. Something I needed to say to him had, as it were, already been torn from my lips, and now I chased after it, hurrying, afraid I might fail to catch it up, lose it and forget it.

The construction site loomed before me like a yellow mirage, suspended in the air. There it was — the Quarter! There it was, far away, behind the houses. The separate parts of the scaffolding merged together; it hovered in the distance like a very light and delicate beehive...

I drew closer. Rumbblings and dust. I grew deaf and cataracts covered my eyes. I walked along a wooden planking. A sparrow flew off a tree stump, the planks bent slightly under me, bringing back happy childhood memories of riding on a seesaw, and I walked along, smiling at the way I was being covered in sawdust and my shoulders were turning grey with it...

Where should I look for him?

A lorry barred my way. Stuck in the entrance gates, it kept rising and falling like a beetle trying to crawl off a horizontal surface onto a vertical one.

The paths were maze-like: it was just like walking inside an ear.

"Comrade Babichev?"

A hand pointed to where he was. Somewhere a drill was boring a hole.

"Where?"

"Over there."

I walked along a girder over the chasm, balancing myself. Something like the hold of a ship yawned below.

Boundless emptiness, black and cool. Altogether, it reminded me of a wharf. I was in everyone's way.

"Where?"

"Over there."

He's elusive.

He flashed by once: his torso passed by over some sort of wooden rails. And vanished. And then he reappeared, high up overhead — between us stretched a vast void, all of which would soon be one of the courtyards of the building.

He stopped for a short while. There were several others with him in caps and overalls. All the same, I decided to call him just to say one word — "sorry".

I was shown the shortest way over there. I only had to climb a staircase to reach him. I could already hear voices. A few more steps and I would be there...

But then look what happened: I had to crouch so as not to be swept off. So I crouched down, clinging onto a wooden step. And then he flew overhead. Yes, he literally went soaring past through the air.

From a contorted angle I saw his motionless figure flying past — I could only see his nostrils, not his face, two holes, just as though I were looking up at a statue.

"What was that?"

I went tumbling down the stairs.

He had vanished. He had flown away. On an iron wafer he had flown somewhere else. A latticed shadow accompanied his flight. He was standing on an iron platform, which made a semi-circle with a whining and clanging. So, it was

some technical device, a crane maybe. A platform made of crisscrossed girders. Through the gaps, through the bars, I had caught sight of his nostrils.

I sat down on a step.

"Where is he?" I asked.

The workers around me were laughing, and I was grinning at them all like a clown who had finished his act with a very amusing series of stunts.

"It's not my fault," I said. "He's to blame."

XI

I decided not to go back to him.

My old digs had already been occupied by someone else. A padlock was hanging on the door. The new tenant was out. I recalled that Widow Prokopovich's face was like a padlock. Was she really going to come back into my life?

I spent the night in a park. I was treated to the most exquisite morning. A few other down-and-outs were asleep on benches nearby. They lay huddled up, hands stuck up sleeves and pressed against stomachs, like bound and beheaded Chinamen. The dawn touched them with chilly fingers. They started sighing, groaning, shaking themselves and sitting up with their eyes still closed and the hands still up their sleeves.

The birds awoke. Little sounds rang out: little voices of birds, voices of the grass, talking among themselves. Pigeons began to fidget in a brick niche.

I got up, shivering. I yawned and shook all over like a dog.

(Gates were being opened. A glass was filled with milk. Judges passed sentence. A man who had worked right through the night went up to a window and was surprised he did not recognise the street in the unusual light. A patient asked for a drink. A little boy ran into the kitchen to see if a mouse had been caught in the trap. Morning had begun.)

That day I wrote Andrei Babichev a letter.

I had a meal of Nelson meat-and-potato pasties at the Palace of Labour in Solyanka Street, drank beer and wrote:

"Andrei Petrovich!

"You gave me comfort. You took me under your wing. I slept on your wonderful sofa. You know what a wretched time I had had before that. Then that blessed night came about. You took pity on me, picked me up drunk.

"You covered me with linen sheets. These smooth, cool sheets seemed designed to soothe my wrath and relieve my anxiety.

"Even ivory blanket-cover buttons came into my life, and you only had to look at them from the right angle and radiant rainbow rings came floating into them. I recognised them at once. They had returned from the long forgotten past, from the innermost recesses of my childhood memories.

"I had been given a bed.

"This word itself was as poetically enigmatic for me as the word 'crambo'.

"You had given me a bed. From your pinnacle of prosperity you lowered upon me a cloud-bed, a halo bathing me in magic warmth, a halo swathed in memories, regrets without bitterness, and hopes. I began to hope that much more could

be retrieved from what had been predestined in my youth.

"You have been my benefactor, Andrei Petrovich!

"Just imagine, a celebrity showered me with affection! A remarkable public figure gave me shelter in his house. I want to express my feelings to you.

"Strictly speaking, there is only one feeling: hatred.

"I hate you, Comrade Babichev.

"I'm writing you this letter to bring you down a peg or two.

"From my very first day with you I began to feel afraid. You stifled me. You crushed me.

"You stand there in your underpants, giving off a beery smell of sweat. I look at you, and your face begins to get strangely bigger, your body expands — swelling, rippling, like the clay of an idol statue. I feel like screaming.

"Who's given him the right to stifle me?

"In what way am I worse than him?

"Is he cleverer?

"More spiritual?

"More subtle, sensitive?

"Stronger? More important?

"Superior not only in position but in actual fact?

"Why must I acknowledge his superiority?

"These are the questions I asked myself. Each day my observations gave me a fraction of the answer. A month has passed and now I know the answer. And I'm no longer afraid of you. You're just a thick-headed, stuck-up official. And nothing more. It wasn't with the weight of your personality that you stifled me. Oh no! Now

I understand you perfectly, and can see right through you. My fear of you has passed like something childish. I've rid myself of you. You're a fraud!

"At one time I was plagued with doubts. 'Maybe I'm a nobody next to him?' I thought. 'Maybe, for an ambitious person like myself he is indeed an example of a great man?'

"But it appeared you were nothing but a stuck-up official, ignorant and thick-headed, like all officials were before you and will be ever after. And like all stuck-up officials, you're a petty tyrant. Only your domineering nature can account for the fact that you raised such a storm over a piece of mediocre salami, or that you brought home a stranger off the street. And maybe it's the same desire to domineer that caused you to befriend Volodya Makarov, about whom the only thing I know is that he is a footballer. You're a pompous lord. You need jesters and hangers-on. I am sure that Volodya Makarov ran away from you because he could not stand your mockery and abuse. You no doubt systematically treated him as a fool just like you did me.

"You said he lived with you just like a son and that he had saved your life, you even got quite sentimental thinking about him. I remember. But it's all a bunch of lies. You're embarrassed to admit your aristocratic inclinations. But I spotted the mole on your back.

"To start with, when you said that the sofa belonged to him and that on his return I would have to get the hell out of there, I felt hurt. But a minute later I realised that you were cold and indifferent to him just as you were to me.

You're an aristocrat and we're your hangers-on.

"But I can assure you that neither he nor I will come back to you again. You don't respect people. He'll come back only if he is more stupid than me.

"Such is my fate that I neither served time in prison as a revolutionary nor actively fought for the cause of the Revolution. So I shall not be entrusted with such responsible work as, say, making soda water or managing an apiary.

"But does this mean I'm an unworthy son of the times while you are a worthy one? Does this mean I'm a nobody while you're somebody great?

"You found me in the street...

"How dumbly you acted!

" 'He's down-and-out,' you thought. 'Oh well, let the dull little fellow do a bit of work. Well, he could be a proof-reader, say, or a copy-reader, or a clerk.' You did not condescend to the young man from the street. Here your self-adoration could be seen, too. You're a stuck-up official, Comrade Babichev!

"Who did you think I was? A degenerating representative of the riffraff? You decided to support me? Thank you. I'm strong — did you get that? — I'm strong enough to sink and then come up and then sink again.

"I wonder what you'll do when you've read my letter. Maybe you'll try to get me deported or maybe locked away in an institution? You can do anything, you're an important person, a member of the government. After all, you said your brother should be shot. You said you'd get him sent to a madhouse.

"Your brother's made a strange impression

on me — I can't figure him out. There's a mystery here which I don't understand at all. There's something strange and fascinating about the name Ophelia. And you, I sense, are afraid of this name.

"I can still guess a thing or two. And foresee one or two things also. I'll get in your way. Yes, I'm almost sure that's what's going to happen. But I won't let you get away with it. You want to use your brother's daughter for your own ends. I've only seen her once. Yes, it was me who told her about the bough full of flowers and leaves. You've no imagination. You mocked me. I overheard you on the phone. You also belittled me in the girl's eyes, just as you'd belittled her father. It doesn't pay you to admit that the girl who you want to subdue and make your fool — just as you tried to make us your fools — that this girl has a delicate, sensitive soul. You want to utilise her, just as you utilise (I purposely use your word) mutton heads and legs ingeniously with the help of electric spiral drills (I quote from your brochure).

"But no, I won't let you. What a tasty morsel she is for a glutton and a gourmand like yourself. Do your physical desires really stop at nothing? What will prevent you from seducing the girl? The fact that she's your niece? You make a mockery of family ties, of kinship. You want to have her eating out of your hand.

"And that's why you attack your brother so viciously. But you only have to look at him to see that he's a remarkable man. I think, without even knowing him, that he's a genius — what at, I don't know... You're trying to drive him into a corner. I heard you thumping the railings

with your fists. You've made the girl abandon her father.

"But you won't force me into a corner.

"I'm going to protect your brother and his daughter. Listen, you thickhead who sneered at the bough full of flowers and leaves, listen — yes, only this way, only with this exclamation was I able to express my delight when I caught sight of her. But what words do you have in store for her? You called me an alcoholic simply because I spoke to the girl in metaphorical language which you are unable to understand. Incomprehensible things are either funny or frightening. Just now you're laughing but soon I'll see you horrified. Don't imagine I think only in images — I think realistically too. I can speak about her, about Valya, in ordinary terms, and if you like, I'll provide you with a series of definitions which you'll be able to understand, specially to taunt you and tease you with something you won't get, my lord sausage-maker!

"Yes, she stood before me — I'll first say it in my own way: she was lighter than a shadow, she could have been envied by the lightest shadow of all — the shadow of falling snow. Yes, I'll say it first in my own way: she listened to me not with her ears but with her temples, her head slightly inclined; yes, her face was like an almond: both in colour and in shape — suntanned, high-cheekboned and tapering towards the chin. Can you understand that? No. Well, listen to this then. Because she had been running, her dress had become untidy and undone, and I saw that she was not tanned all over, that she had a delicate blue vein on her front...

"And now here's your way of describing this

lovely dish you're longing to savour. Before me stood a girl aged about sixteen, almost a child, with broad shoulders, grey eyes, and short tousled hair — a delightful adolescent, slender as a chess piece (that's already my expression!), petite.

"You won't get her.

"She's going to be my wife. I've been dreaming of her all my life.

"We'll wage war! We'll fight it out! You are thirteen years older than me. They're behind you and ahead of me. Just a couple more achievements in the sausage-making business, a couple more cheap canteens and your career will be over.

"Oh, I have other dreams!

"I'll get Valya, not you. We'll cause a stir in Europe where people love fame.

"I'll get Valya as a prize for everything: for my humiliations, for the youth which I did not manage to see, for my dog's life.

"I used to tell you about the cook. Remember, how she washed in the corridor. Well, I shall see something else: some day, somewhere, a room bathed in bright sunlight, a blue basin standing by the window, the window's reflection dancing in the basin, and Valya washing over it, sparkling like a fish, splashing herself and running her fingers over the keyboard of water...

"I'll do everything to make this dream come true! You won't utilise Valya.

"Goodbye, Comrade Babichev!

"How could I have played such a humiliating role for a whole month? I won't come back to you again. Wait and see. Maybe your first fool will come back to you. Send him my greetings. How

happy I am not to be coming back to you again!

"Every time my pride is hurt, I know that through an association of ideas I shall recall one of the evenings spent near your writing desk. What dread memories!

"Evening time. You are at your desk. Self-adoration radiates from you. 'I'm working,' buzz these rays, 'hear that, Kavalero, I'm working, don't interrupt ... ssh ... you Philistine.'

"And in the mornings you are praised left, right and centre:

" 'What a great man! What a remarkable man! There's an extraordinary personality — Andrei Petrovich Babichev!'

"But while these toadies sang your praises, and while you became bloated with conceit, beside you there lived a man whom everybody ignored and whose opinion was of no interest to anyone; there lived a man who followed your every movement, who studied you, observed you — not as an inferior or a slave, but calmly, as an equal, and this man came to the conclusion that you are a high-placed official — nothing more — an ordinary person elevated to an enviable high position by mere external conditions.

"So you can stop play-acting.

"That's all I wanted to tell you.

"You wanted to make me your fool but I've become your enemy. 'Who are you fighting, you wretch?' you yelled at your brother. I don't know who you meant: yourself or your party, your factories, or your shops and apiaries, that I don't know. But I know who I am fighting — you! The most ordinary, run-of-the-mill aristocrat, egotist, debauchee, thickhead who's quite confident he will get away with blue murder. And I'm fighting

for your brother, for the girl you're deceiving, for tenderness, for inspiration, for individuality, for moving names like Ophelia, for everything you're suppressing, you remarkable man. Give my regards to Solomon Shapiro..."

XII

I was let in by the cleaner. Babichev had already left. The traditional glass of milk had been drunk. The cloudy glass was standing on the table. Nearby was a plate of biscuits shaped like Hebraic letters.

Human life is paltry. The movement of worlds — formidable. When I first came here, at two in the afternoon the sunbeam was perched on the door-post. Thirty-six days later, it had hopped into another room. The Earth had covered yet another part of its course. Sunbeams, children's games with mirrors, remind us of eternity.

I went out onto the balcony.

On the corner a small bunch of people were listening to the church bells. They were pealing in a church which could not be seen from the balcony. This church was famed for its bell-ringer. The idlers were craning their necks. They could see the celebrated bell-ringer at work.

Once I myself had stood for a good hour on the corner. Through the arches I could see the inside of the belfry. There, in the sooty darkness, similar to that in attics, between rafters wrapped in cobwebs, the bell-ringer stormed about. Twenty bells ripped him apart. Like a coachman, he leaned back, lunged his head forward and maybe

even shouted commands. He writhed at the centre of the gloomy web of ropes, now hanging motionless on his outstretched arms, now diving into a corner, and distorting the whole pattern of the web — a mysterious musician, indistinguishable, black, perhaps misshapen like Quasimodo.

(Perhaps, however, it was the distance which made him frightening. If you liked, you could also have described him as a little fellow banging about on pots and pans. And the sound of the famous bells as a mixture of restaurant and railway-station noises.)

I listened from the balcony.

“Tom-vir-lir-li! Tom-vir-lir-li! Tom-vir-lir-li!”

Tomvirlirli. There was some Tom Virlirli wafting about in the air.

*Tom Virlirli
Brought a packbag along,
Tom Virlirli,
So young and strong!*

The dishevelled bell-ringer had put many of my mornings to music. Tom is the peal of the big bell, the big pot. Virlirli — the little pans.

Tom Virlirli entered my life on one of those glorious mornings I had enjoyed in this house. Music turned to words. I had a vivid mental picture of this Tom.

A youth stands gazing over the city. This completely unknown young man has already arrived; he is already near; he can already see the town, asleep and unsuspecting. The early morning mist is only just beginning to clear. The city is swirling in the valley like a sparkling

green cloud. Tom Virilirli, smiling and pressing his hand to his heart, looks at the city, and searches for the landmarks he knows from children's picture books.

The young man has a packbag on his back.
He will do everything.

He epitomises haughty youth, and clandestine, proud daydreams.

The days will pass — and soon (the sunbeam will only hop a few times from the door-post to the next room) other boys, who also dream of walking through the suburbs of the city on a May morning with a packbag on their back, will be singing a song about a man who did all he wanted to do:

*Tom Virilirli
Brought a packbag along,
Tom Virilirli,
So young and strong.*

This was how the peals of an ordinary Moscow church were transformed inside me into a romantic daydream of an obviously Western European character.

I will leave the letter on the table, collect up my things (in a packbag?) and leave. I folded the letter into a square and put it on the glass top, next to the picture of the person I considered my companion in misfortune.

There was a knock on the door. Him?

I opened it.

In the doorway, holding a packbag in his hand, smiling cheerfully (a Japanese smile), just as though he had spotted a dear, much-missed friend, stood Tom Virilirli, shy, and in some way rather like Valya.

It was the dark-complexioned young man, Volodya Makarov. He stared at me in surprise, then ran his eyes over the room. Several times his gaze returned to the sofa, and under the sofa where my overshoes were showing.

"Hello," I said.

He walked over to the sofa, sat down and remained sitting for a while. Then he walked over to the bedroom, stayed there for a while, returned and, stopping by the flamingo-vase, asked me:

"Where's Andrei Petrovich? At the office?"

"Don't know for certain. Andrei Petrovich will be back this evening. Maybe he'll bring back a new fool with him. You're fool number one, I'm number two, and he'll be number three. Or were there some other fools before you? Or maybe he'll bring the young girl back with him."

"Who?" asked Tom Viriliri. "What?" he asked, frowning with bewilderment, and raising his temples.

He sat down on the sofa again. The overshoes under the sofa were bothering him. I could tell he would have liked to touch them with the back of his boot.

"Why have you come back?" I asked. "What the hell have you come back for? Your part, like mine, is over. He's busy with someone else now. He's debauching a young girl. His niece, Valya. Got it? Go away! Listen, will you!"

(I rushed over to him. He sat still.)

"Listen! Do what I've done! Tell him the whole truth... Look," (I grabbed the letter from the table) "here's the letter I've written to him..."

He pushed me away. The packbag settled down nonchalantly next to the sofa. He went

over to the telephone and called the office.

So my things were left scattered about the room.

I fled.

XIII

I took the letter with me. I decided to destroy it. The footballer was living with him like a son. I could tell by the way his packbag had settled down in the corner, by the way he had gazed round the room, lifted the telephone receiver, called the number that he felt completely at home here and that the place was his. My bad night's sleep had affected me. I had not written what I had intended. Babichev would not understand my indignation. He would put it all down to envy. He would reckon I envied Volodya.

What a good thing I had taken the letter with me.

Otherwise it would have been like firing a blank.

I'd been wrong to think that Volodya lived with him as his fool and entertained him. Consequently, I should not have stuck up for him in my letter. Quite the reverse. Now that I had met him, I saw how haughty he was. Babichev was rearing and nurturing someone in his own image. Another stuck-up, blind man.

His stare said: "Sorry, you've made a mistake. You're the hanger-on. As for me, I'm the pure-blooded son of a lord."

I was sitting on a bench when all of a sudden I discovered something terrible.

The folded square of paper turned out to be

the wrong one — mine was slightly bigger; it wasn't my letter. Mine was still there. In my flurry I had seized hold of another letter. And here it was:

"Dear, kind Andrei Petrovich! All the very best to you! Are you keeping fit? Your new tenant hasn't strangled you yet, has he? Ivan Petrovich hasn't set Ophelia on you, has he? Watch out — your Kavalеров and Ivan Petrovich might hit it off together and ruin you. Make sure you look after yourself. After all, you're ever-so gentle and easy to hurt, so do take care...

"Why is it you've become so trusting? You let all sorts of riffraff into your house. Get him to clear off! The very next day you should have said, 'Well, young man, you've slept it off, so goodbye now!' Why are you such a softie? As soon as I read the bit in your letter about you thinking of me and feeling sorry for the drunk on the street, and picking him up and taking him home because of me, because some such accident might happen to me somewhere and I may be left lying like this — as soon as I read all this I felt amused and confused at the same time. As if it wasn't you but Ivan Petrovich.

"It all went as I had foreseen: you brought this crafty devil home and then were completely at a loss — not knowing, of course, what to do with him. It was embarrassing to ask him to clear out, but you hadn't a clue what to do, had you? You see, I'm moralising to you. It's your work that's to blame: it makes you oversensitive — all those fruits, herbs, bees, calves and the like. But I work in heavy industry. Laugh if you like, Andrei Petrovich! You always laugh at me. I'm, you see, from a new generation.

"So what's going to happen now? I mean, when I'm back — what will your misfit do? What if he bursts into tears and refuses to move off the sofa? And you feel sorry for him? Yes, I'm jealous. I'll throw him out and smash his face in. It's you who's the softie — you only shout, pound your fist, beat your chest but when it comes to the crunch, you're always full of pity. If it hadn't been for me, Valya would still be having a miserable time at Ivan Petrovich's. Is she still with you? She hasn't gone back, has she? You know perfectly well yourself that Ivan Petrovich is a cunning fellow, and forever pulling fast ones. He even admits himself to being a swindler and a charlatan, doesn't he? So you mustn't feel sorry for him.

"How about trying to get him into a mental hospital? No, he'll run away. Or what if you send your Kavalero to a hospital? He'll take offence.

"Oh well, never mind. Don't be angry. After all, it was you who said: 'Teach me, Volodya, and I'll teach you.' So, now we're both learning.

"I'll be arriving shortly, in a few days' time. My father sends his regards to you. Farewell, little town of Murom! When I walk along at night, I realise that there's really no town to speak of at all. There're just workshops and the town's just an appendage to them. The workshops are the be-all and end-all of everything. At night, you know, it's pitch-black in the town — gloomy and spooky. But in the fields nearby the workshops' lights blaze away and it's ever-so jolly!

"And in the town I saw a calf chasing after a district police inspector to get at the briefcase

he was holding under his arm. The calf cantered along, moving his lips as though he wanted to nibble it... It looked like this: a hedge, a puddle, an inspector striding along in a red hat, so far, so good, but then the calf takes a dive at his briefcase. These are contradictions, aren't they?

"I don't like calves. I'm a human machine. You won't recognise me. I've turned into a machine. If I haven't turned into one yet, I certainly want to. The machines here are terrific. Thoroughbreds! Remarkably impassive, proud machines. Not like the ones in your salami factories. Yours are just primitive. All they can do is slaughter calves for you. I want to be a machine. I want to get your advice. I want to be proud of my work, proud because I'm working. And to be indifferent, you see, to everything that isn't work! I'm envious of the machine — that's what it is! In what way am I inferior to it? After all, it was we who invented and designed it but it's turned out to be much stronger than us. Switch it on and off it goes! And when it works, it does everything to a tee. I want to do the same, you see, Andrei Petrovich — to a tee. How I'm longing to talk to you!

"I imitate you in every way. I even smack my lips like you do on purpose.

"How often I've thought, goodness me, how lucky I've been! You've set me on my feet, Andrei Petrovich! Not all Komsomol members live like me. But, then, I live with you, the wisest and most marvellous of men. Anyone would give anything for such a life. I know, you see, that a lot of people envy me. Thank

you, Andrei Petrovich! Don't mock me by calling this a declaration of love. You'll say, huh, fancy a machine making a declaration of love. Right? No, I mean it: I will become a machine!

"How's work? How's the construction of the Quarter coming along? Nothing's collapsed? Have you settled matters with the Heat and Power Trust? How's Kampf?"

"And how about things at home? So, a complete stranger is sleeping on my sofa, is he? He'll spread lice I bet. Remember how they brought me home from the football match? I can still feel it sometimes even now. Remember how they brought me home? And how frightened you were, Andrei Petrovich? You really were, weren't you? You're such a softie! I lay on the sofa, my leg as heavy as a steel rail. I looked at you sitting there at the table, behind the green lampshade, writing. I looked at you and then suddenly you looked back at me and immediately I closed my eyes, just like I used to with mother!

"Talking of football... I'm going to play for the Moscow team against the Germans. And unless they pick Shukhov, I'll also be in the USSR team. Isn't that fantastic!

"How's Valya? Of course, we'll get married! In four years' time. You're laughing, you reckon we won't last out that long. But here it is in writing: four years. Yes. I'm going to be the Edison of the new age. We'll kiss for the first time when your Quarter opens. Yes. You don't believe me? She and I have made an agreement. You don't know about it. At the opening ceremony of the Quarter we are

going to kiss on the stage as the band plays.

"Don't you forget me, Andrei Petrovich. What if I were suddenly to arrive and find your Kavalero had become your best friend and you'd quite forgotten me — he had just taken over my place and was doing exercises and going to the building site with you? Who knows what might happen? Maybe he's turned out to be a remarkable young man much nicer than me, and maybe you and he have hit it off, so that I, the Edison of the new age, will have to clear the hell out? Maybe you are all sitting together now — you, him, Ivan Petrovich and Valya — and laughing at me? And your Kavalero's married Valya? Tell me the truth. If that's so, I'll kill you, Andrei Petrovich. Honest, I will. For betraying what we talked about and our plans. You hear that?

"Well, I've got carried away writing, I'm taking up a busy man's time. To a tee, I said, but I've gone absolutely wild. It's because we've been apart for so long, isn't it? Well, so long for now, my dear and much respected friend, goodbye, we'll see each other soon."

XIV

A huge cloud shaped like South America was hovering over the city. It shone brightly but its shadow looked ominous. The shadow was advancing upon Babichev's street at an astronomically slow pace.

All the people who had already entered the mouth of this street and were moving against the current, could see the movements of the

shadow, and felt everything darkening before their eyes; it was taking the ground away from under their feet. They seemed to be walking on top of a revolving sphere.

I struggled on with them.

An overhanging balcony. A jacket on the railings. The church bells were not pealing any more. I took over the idlers' place on the corner. A young man appeared on the balcony. He looked surprised to see the advancing gloom. He looked up, leaned over the railings and stared.

His stairs, his door. I knock. My lapel is twitching from my heartbeats. I have come to fight.

I am let in. The person who opens the door for me draws back, taking the door with him. And the first thing I see is Andrei Babichev, standing in the middle of the room, his feet planted wide enough apart for a whole army of Lilliputians to pass through. His hands are thrust inside his trouser pockets. His jacket is undone and pulled back. Because his hands are in his pockets, the folds on either side of his back form funnels. His stance says, "Well?"

I see only him but I can hear Volodya Markarov.

I stride towards Babichev. It starts raining.

In a moment I will fall to my knees before him.

"Don't drive me away! Andrei Petrovich, don't drive me away! I've understood everything. Believe me, as you do Volodya! Believe me: I'm young, too, I'm going to be the Edison of the new age, too, I'm going to pray for you, too! How could I have let the chance slip by, how could I have remained blind and not done

everything to make you love me! Forgive me, let me in, give me a deadline of four years..."

But instead of falling to my knees, I ask in a spiteful tone:

"How come you are not at work?"

"Get out of here!" I hear in reply.

He replied at once, as though we had rehearsed our parts well. But I felt the full impact of his words only moments later.

Something extraordinary happened.

It was raining. Possibly, there was lightning.

I do not want to speak in images. I want to express myself simply. I once read Camille Flammarion's *Atmosphere*. (What a cosmic name — Flammarion! It's a star itself!) He describes spherical lightning, its extraordinary effect: a smooth round ball spins soundlessly into a room, filling it with dazzling light... Oh, I certainly don't intend using banal comparisons. But the cloud did look suspicious. And the shadow was advancing like in a dream. And it was raining. The window was open in the bedroom. You mustn't leave windows open in a thunderstorm! A draught!

With the rain, with the raindrops, bitter as tears, with the gusts of wind, causing the flamingo-vase to sweep up like a flame and set fire to the curtains which were also sweeping up towards the ceiling — with all this, Valya comes out of the bedroom.

But only I am stunned by her presence. It's all quite simple, in fact: Volodya has arrived, and his friends have hurried over to see him.

Possibly, Babichev drove over and picked up Valya who had secretly been dreaming of this day. It's all quite simple. And I should be

sent off to a mental institution, and undergo hypnosis treatment to stop me thinking in images and ascribing to a girl the effects of spherical lightning.

Well, I'll mess up this simple situation.

"Get out of here!" the words finally sink in.

"It's not all that simple..." I begin.

There's a draught. The door is still open. The wind has caused me to grow a wing. It is flapping wildly over my shoulder, fanning my eyelids. Half my face is anesthetized by the draught.

"It's not all that simple," I say, pressing against the door-post and trying to break off the dreadful wing. "While you were away, Volodya, Comrade Babichev lived with Valya. In the four years you have decided to wait until you get married, Andrei Petrovich will have enjoyed himself with Valya quite long enough..."

I found myself on the other side of the door. Half my face was anesthetized. Maybe I had not even felt the blow.

The lock clicked above me just like a branch breaking, and I fell off the wonderful tree — an indolent overripe fruit which makes a plopping sound when it lands.

"It's all over," I said calmly, getting up. "Now I'm going to kill you, Comrade Babichev!"

XV

It is raining.

The rain is moving along Tsvetnoi Boulevard;

it strides through the Circus, turns onto the boulevard to the right and, getting up to the top of Petrovka Street, suddenly goes blind and loses its confidence.

I cross Trubnaya Square, thinking about the fairy-tale fencer who walked through the rain, beating back the raindrops with his foil. The fencer's foil glinted, the folds of his cape flapped; he twisted and rippled like a flute — and kept dry. Thus, he received his father's fortune. Whereas I was soaked to the skin, and had, it seemed, been slapped across the face.

I find that a landscape viewed through the wrong end of a pair of binoculars gains in brilliance, clarity and relief. The colours and contours seem to become more precise. An object, while remaining familiar, suddenly becomes laughably minute and peculiar. This conjures up for the observer childhood memories. It's just like dreaming. You'll notice that a person who has turned his binoculars round the wrong way, invariably starts beaming with joy.

After the rain the city acquired brilliance and stereoscopic relief. Everyone saw it: the tramcar was carmine; the road's cobblestones were far from being one colour — some of them even turned green. High up a house-painter came out of the niche where he had been sheltering from the rain like a pigeon, and set off across his brick canvas; a boy in a window was trying to catch the sun on a fragment of mirror...

I bought an egg and a French loaf off an old woman. I cracked the egg against the railing of a tramcar in full view of the pas-

sengers who were flying from the direction of Petrovka Gates.

I headed uphill. The benches passed by on a level with my knees. Here the pathway was slightly undulating. Lovely young mothers were sitting on outspread scarves on the benches. On their suntanned faces their eyes shimmered like fish scales. Their necks and shoulders were also suntanned. But through their blouses I could see that their large young breasts were white. Lonely and downtrodden, I nostalgically imbibed this whiteness which symbolised milk, motherhood, wedlock, pride and purity.

One nanny was holding a baby who was dressed like the Pope.

A sunflower seed was hanging from the lip of a young girl in a red bandanna. She was listening to the band so intently, she stepped into a puddle without noticing it. The bell mouths of the brass resembled elephants' ears.

For all of them — for the mothers, for the nannies, for the girls, for the musicians entangled in their brass, I was a source of amusement. The trumpet players looked askance at me and puffed out their cheeks even harder. The young girl chortled, and the sunflower seed dropped from her lip at last. And then she saw she was standing in a puddle and, blaming me for her own bad luck, she turned away in a huff.

I'll prove I'm no laughing stock. Nobody understands me. Things you don't understand seem either funny or frightening. They will all be scared out of their wits.

I went up to a street mirror.

I love street mirrors very much. They loom suddenly across your path. Ordinary and quiet,

just another city route promising you neither miracles nor visions. You're walking along, expecting nothing, then you look up and suddenly in a flash it dawns on you that incredible changes have taken place in the world, in the laws governing the world.

The laws of optics, geometry have been broken, and so has the motive force which directed your steps, your movements, your desire to walk in that particular direction. You begin to think that you are seeing through the back of your head, you even smile distractedly at passers-by, and feel embarrassed about having such a privilege. "Ah..." you sigh softly.

The tramcar, which has only just vanished from your field of vision, is again hurtling along in front of you, cutting through the edge of the avenue like a knife through a cake. The straw hat hanging on a blue ribbon over someone's arm you can see again, floating past (you had spotted it just a second before, it had caught your eye but you had not bothered to look round at it then).

There is an open space ahead of you. Everyone else is sure it is a house, a wall, but you have been given the privilege of knowing it is not a house! You have discovered the secret: this is not a wall, this is a mysterious world where everything you have just seen is repeated, and, what's more, repeated with the same stereoscopic relief and clarity which you get only by looking through the wrong end of binoculars.

You are, so to speak, bowled over, so suddenly were the laws broken, and so incredible was the change of proportions. But you are delighted by this dizzy sensation... Once you've unravelled

the mystery, you hurry towards the shiny blue square. Your face is suspended motionlessly in the mirror, the only thing left with natural forms, the only fragment left of the proper world. Everything else has collapsed, changed and acquired new properties which you simply cannot grasp, not even if you stand for a whole hour in front of the mirror where your face looks as though it is in a tropical garden. The grass and trees are too green, the sky too blue.

It's unlikely you'll be able to tell (without turning away from the mirror) which way a pedestrian you can see in the mirror is headed... Only if you turn round...

I gazed into the mirror, chewing the last bit of my bread.

I turned away.

A pedestrian who had appeared from one side was walking towards the mirror. He could not see himself because I was in the way. I caught the smile he had intended for himself. He was a head shorter than me and so looked up.

He hurried towards the mirror to locate and brush off a caterpillar which had landed on a far corner of his shoulder. To flick it off, he had to thrust his shoulder forward like a violinist.

I was still thinking about optical illusions, about mirror tricks and so I asked the man whom I still had not recognised:

"Where did you come from? How did you get here?"

"What?" he replied. "How did I get here? (He gazed at me with clear eyes.) I've made myself up."

He took off his bowler, revealing his bald

pate, and bowed with exaggerated pomp, the way someone who's come down in the world greets almsgivers. And, just like someone who's known better days, too, the bags under his eyes hung down like lilac stockings. He was sucking a sweet.

At once I realised this was my friend, my mentor, and comforter.

I grabbed him by the arm and almost embracing him, said, "Tell me, answer me!.."

He raised his eyebrows.

"What is Ophelia?"

He got ready to answer. But out of the corner of his lips came a dribble of juice from the sweet inside his bulging cheek. Delighted and touched, I waited for his reply.

PART TWO

I

The approach of old age did not daunt Ivan Babichev. Sometimes, however, you would hear him complain about the speed with which life flowed by, about wasted years and the stomach cancer he suspected he had... But these complaints were voiced in too light-hearted a manner, and, most likely, not even very sincere. Just rhetorical complaints.

Sometimes he would put the palm of his hand on the left side of his chest, and ask:

"I wonder what it sounds like when a large blood vessel ruptures in your heart?"

Once he raised his hand, showing his friends the back of it where the veins forked out like the branches of a tree, and launched into the following soliloquy:

"This," he said, "is the tree of life. This tree tells me more about life and death than flowering and fading trees in orchards. I don't remember when exactly I discovered that my hand blossomed like a tree... But it was most likely at that lovely time when the flowering and fading of trees reminded me not of life and death but of the beginning and end of the school year! This tree of mine was blue then, blue and slender, and the blood which at that time I thought of as a light rather than a liquid, glowed like the dawn over it, giving the whole landscape of my hand the quality of a Japanese watercolour...

"The years went by, I changed, and so did the tree.

"I can remember the wonderful time when it grew up. I felt so proud watching its prolific flowering. It grew gnarled and brown and therein lay its strength! I could then call it the mighty rigging of my hand. But now, my friends, look how brittle and feeble it is!

"It now looks to me as though the branches are breaking off and hollows have appeared... This is sclerosis, my friends! And the skin is growing dull and the tissues are becoming watery underneath — isn't this a mist settling over my tree of life, a mist which will soon envelop all of me?"

There were three Babichev brothers. Ivan was the second brother. The eldest, Roman, a member of an anti-tsarist militant organisation, was executed for his part in a terrorist act.

The youngest brother, Andrei, lived abroad. "How do you like it?" Ivan wrote to him in Paris. "We've got a martyr in the family! How delighted Grandma would have been!" To which Andrei succinctly replied with characteristic coarseness: "You're just a bastard." This marked the beginning of the discord between the two brothers.

Ever since he was a little boy Ivan had been a source of wonder to his family and their friends.

At twelve he had demonstrated in his family circle a strange-looking device resembling a lampshade with tassles and little bells, and had insisted that with the help of his device one could have any dream one cared to.

"All right," said his father, a school head-master and Latin scholar. "I believe you. I want

a dream about Roman history."

"What episode in particular?" the boy asked in a business-like manner.

"Anything you like, say, the Battle of Pharsalus. But if it doesn't work, I'll thrash you."

Late that evening a marvellous jingling sound went echoing round and round the rooms. In his study the headmaster was lying flat and rigid with rage, as though in a coffin. Ivan's mother hovered outside the spitefully closed doors. Smiling cheerfully, little Ivan walked up and down by the sofa, waving his lampshade, like a tightrope walker waves a Chinese parasol. The next morning his father leapt out of bed, rushed over to the nursery in his nightclothes, and pulled the chubby, good-natured, lazy, sleepy Ivan out of bed. The light was still wan, and, who knows, perhaps something might still have happened but the headmaster tore back the curtains, pretending it was already daybreak. Ivan's mother tried to stop the thrashing by shielding his backside with her hands and crying, "Don't beat him, darling, don't beat him... He made a mistake... Honestly, he did... So what does it matter if you did not have the dream?.. The jingling echoed in the wrong direction. You know, our apartment is awfully ... er ... damp. It was me who dreamed of the Battle of Pharsalus! Yes, I had a dream about the battle, darling!"

"Don't lie," retorted the headmaster. "Tell me it in detail then. How did the armour of the Balearic archers differ from that of the Numidian slingers?.. Well?"

He waited for a moment, his wife started sobbing and the little experimenter was given

a thrashing. He took it like Galileo. That evening the maid told her mistress that she had decided to decline the proposal of marriage made to her by a man called Dobrodeyev.

"He's a liar, he can't be trusted," she explained. "All night I dreamed of horses, terrible horses galloping on and on, in what looked like masks. Horses in a dream mean lies."

Losing control of her lower jaw, Ivan's mother drifted towards her husband's study doors like a sleepwalker. The cook froze by the stove, feeling that she, too, was losing control of her lower jaw.

The headmaster was sitting at his desk, sticking his initials back onto his cigar-case. His wife touched him on the shoulder and murmured:

"Darling, have a word with Frosya... It seems Frosya's had a dream about the Battle of Pharsalus..."

How the headmaster reacted to the maid's dream is not known. As for Ivan, a couple of months after the conjured-dream incident, he was already talking about another invention of his.

He had apparently invented a special soapy liquid and a special little tube through which you could blow an amazing soap bubble. As it flew up, this bubble would grow from the size of a Christmas tree decoration to that of a football, and then of a sphere as big as a flowerbed, until finally it reached the proportions of a hot-air balloon at which point it would explode and sprinkle golden rain over the town.

His father was in the kitchen. (He belonged to that lugubrious breed of fathers who are

proud of knowing certain culinary secrets and who consider it their exclusive right to, say, determine the number of bay leaves needed for a soup, which had been a source of pride to the family for generations, or, say, to time eggs boiling in a pan to produce perfect soft-boiled eggs.)

Outside the kitchen window little Ivan was happily day-dreaming by the wall of the house. With his jaundiced ear his father listened and watched Ivan standing in the middle of a crowd of boys, and making up stories about the bubble. It was going to grow as big as a hot-air balloon.

The headmaster again felt galled. His eldest son, Roman, had left home a year ago, and he was now taking it out on his younger sons.

God had punished him with these sons.

He turned his back on the window. He started grinning, he was so livid. At lunch he expected Ivan to start telling stories again but the boy kept quiet. "It's as if he despises me, takes me for a fool," the headmaster fumed silently. In the late afternoon he was drinking tea on the balcony, when all of a sudden, far, far away, on the horizon, in the melting yellow rays of the sun, glittering like glass, he caught sight of a large orange balloon. It was floating slowly along, cutting across the horizon in a slanting curve.

The headmaster rushed inside and through the open doors in the next room at once set eyes on Ivan sitting on the window-sill, staring hard outside and clapping his hands loudly.

"I got total satisfaction that day," reminisced Ivan Petrovich. "My father was scared.

For a long time afterwards, whenever I tried to catch his eye, he looked away. And I began to feel sorry for him. A dark shadow appeared on his face and I thought he was going to die. So I magnanimously cast off my magician's cloak. He was a pedantic man, my father, petty over small matters, but inattentive, too. You see, he did not know that on that particular day Ernesto Vitollo flew over the town in a balloon. There were magnificent posters advertising the event. I confessed to my unintentional trickery. I have to admit to you that my experiments with soap bubbles did not produce the results I had envisaged."

(In fact, when Ivan Babichev was a twelve-year-old schoolboy, manned balloon flights were still a rarity, and it is hardly likely that in those days they would have been made over provincial towns.

But even if this is a fantasy, what does it matter! Fantasy is the beloved of reason.)

Ivan Babichev's friends enjoyed listening to his stories.

"And I think it was the night after that distressing day that my father really did have a dream about the Battle of Pharsalus. He did not go to his school the next morning. Mother brought some mineral water into his study for him. Most likely, he was shaken by the details of the battle. Maybe, he could not reconcile himself to the mockery the dream made of history as he saw it... Or maybe he dreamed that the outcome of the battle was determined by the Balearic soldiers who came riding up in air balloons..."

This is how Ivan Babichev's long story about

soap bubbles ended.

Another time he shared with his friends the following episode from his youth:

“A student by the name of Chemiot was courting a young lady, oh dear, I can’t recall her name. Just a minute, if I am not mistaken, it was Lilya Capitanaki — and she tripped along on her heels just like a dainty goat. We boys knew about everything going on in the yard. The student used to stand for hours under Lilya’s balcony, trying to pluck up courage to call from the golden depths of the balcony door this young girl who must have been around sixteen but who seemed an old woman to us boys.

“The student had a blue cap and bright red cheeks. He used to ride over on his bicycle. And I can’t tell you how miserable he was when one Sunday in May — one of the best ten Sundays in the history of meteorological reports — a Sunday when the breeze was so sweet and carressing that you felt like tying a little blue ribbon onto it, the student who had come flying up to the balcony, caught sight of Lilya’s aunt leaning her elbows on the railings. She was wearing such a brightly-coloured, gaudy gown, she looked just like an armchair cover in a provincial lady’s parlour, all frills, trimmings and pleats, and her hairdo reminded you of a snail. And she was obviously delighted to see Chemiot — high up above she opened her arms wide as if she was going to embrace him and announced in a potato voice, so mushy with saliva and so full of tongue, it sounded like she was chewing something hot: ‘Our Lilya’s leaving for Kherson today. At seven-

forty. For a long time, for the whole summer. She told me to send you her regards, Sergei Sergeyevich! All the best!

"But with a lover's instinct the student understood everything. He knew that in the room's gold-tinted depths Lilya was sobbing her heart out and that she was longing to run out onto the balcony and that without seeing the student, she could actually see him for his white jacket, following the laws of physics, reflected the largest number of rays, and was therefore dazzlingly white like Alpine snow, but she could not rush out because her aunt was all-powerful...

"‘Make me a present of your bicycle, and I'll avenge you,’ I said to the student. ‘I know Lilya doesn't want to go anywhere. She's being packed off against her will. Give me your bicycle.’

"‘How will you go about it?’ asked the student, looking scared. A few days later with an innocent look on my face I presented Lilya's aunt with a remedy for warts, supposedly from my mother — the aunt had a large wart in the hollow under her lower lip. Whereupon this aging lady gave me such a smacking kiss that it felt like I was being shot at from a new catapult at point-blank range... My friends, the student was avenged. Out of the aunt's wart there grew a flower, a modest little wild bluebell which quivered gently as she breathed. She was disgraced. With arms raised to the heavens she rushed around the yard, flinging everyone into a panic...

"My joy was twofold. Firstly, because I had brilliantly solved the problem of growing

flowers out of warts and, secondly, because the student gave me his bicycle.

"And in those days, friends, a bicycle was hard to come by. Cyclists were still the subjects of lampoons."

"But what happened to the aunt?"

"You may well ask! She went on living with the flower until the autumn. She eagerly waited for windy days to come and then set off by the back streets, avoiding the busy parts of the town, into the green countryside... She was suffering dreadfully from pangs of conscience. She hid her face in a scarf, and the flower fondly tickled her lips, and its soft rustling was like the whisper of a sadly spent youth, like the ghost of a kiss, nearly the only one, driven back from someone's lips by the stamp of approaching feet... She stopped on a hill and lowered her scarf.

"'Come on, scatter it, scatter it here, there and everywhere! Blow, wind, blow its wretched petals off,' she implored.

"As if to spite her, the wind dropped. But, to make up for it, a crazy bee came flying out of the nearest cottage and, taking aim for the flower, it began to trace buzzing figures of eight round the poor woman. The aunt ran all the way home and, ordering her maid not to admit anyone, she sat in front of her mirror and gazed at her mythical, flower-adorned face, which was swelling up before her very eyes from a sting and turning into something like a tropical root-plant. It was awful! She could not simply cut the flower off because it would have been too dangerous — it was a wart, don't forget! And what if she got blood poisoning!"

Ivan Babichev was a jack-of-all-trades. He wrote poetry and little musical plays, was an excellent artist and good at many other things as well. He even invented a dance designed to make the most of his physical attributes — plumpness and laziness. He was clumsy (like many remarkable people in their youth). The dance was called The Little Jug. He made and sold kites, whistles and flashlights; he was envied by other boys for his skill and fame. In the yard he was nicknamed Mechanic.

Ivan Babichev graduated from the mechanics department of the St. Petersburg Polytechnical Institute in the very same year that his brother Roman was executed. He worked as an engineer at a factory in Nikolayev, near Odessa, until World War I broke out.

Then...

II

But was he really ever an engineer?

The year the Quarter was being built, Ivan had an unprestigious, even shameful way of earning a living for an engineer.

Just imagine, he made sketches of people in bars, composed verses on set themes, read psalms, demonstrated his powers of memory by repeating any five hundred words read to him non-stop.

Sometimes he would produce a deck of cards from his inside pocket, instantly acquiring the look of a cardsharp, and perform tricks.

He was treated to drinks. He would settle down and start upon the main part of his show:

Ivan Babichev was a born preacher.

What did he speak about?

"In us mankind has reached its final limit," he would say, banging his mug like a hoof on the marble top. "You strong personalities, you people who have decided to live your own way, egotists, stubborn characters, what I am saying is meant for you, the most intelligent — my vanguard! Now listen to me! An epoch is drawing to a close. A breaker is dashing against the rocks, seething and frothing. What is it you want? What, tell me? To vanish, disappear in tiny drops of frothing water? No, my friends, this is not how you should perish! No! Come to me and I will teach you."

His audience listened to him with a certain degree of reverence but without much attention, although every now and then they supported his tirade with cries of 'hear, hear' and clapped. He would disappear unexpectedly, after reciting the same four-line farewell verse:

*I'm no German charlatan,
Bound to raise your suspicion!
I'm a simple Soviet stuntman,
I'm a present-day magician!*

He would on occasion also say:

"The gates are closing. Can you hear their hinges creaking? Don't try to get inside! Stop! By stopping, you show you're proud. So be proud. I'm your leader, the king of plebs. All you who sing and weep and rub your nose against the table top when you've drunk your beer and are refused another — your place is here next to me. Come here, all you burdened with

grief and carried along by songs. You who murder through jealousy, or you, tying a noose to hang yourself — I call you both, children of a perishing age: come here, all you dregs and dreamers, fathers of families, doting on your daughters, honest petty bourgeois, people faithful to traditions, obeying the laws of honour, duty and love, fearing bloodshed and disorder, my dear ones — soldiers and generals — let us march ahead! Where to? I shall lead you.”

He loved eating crayfish. A whole army of crayfish would be torn asunder by his hands. He was messy. His shirt, which looked like a bar napkin, was always open in front. What's more, he would sometimes arrive wearing starched cuffs — dirty ones. If it is possible to combine messiness with pretensions at flashy dressing, he did it perfectly. Take, for instance, the bowler. Take the flower in his buttonhole (which stayed there until it nearly turned to seed). And take his frayed trousers and the little tails of thread — all that was left of several of his jacket buttons.

“I devour crayfish. Look: I don't just eat them, I slay them like a high priest. See? Wonderful crayfish. Trey're tangled in seaweed. Oh, it's not seaweed? Just herbs, you say? What difference does it make? Let's agree it's seaweed. Then we can compare a crayfish to a ship brought up from the bottom of the sea. Wonderful crayfish. From the River Kama.”

He licked his fist, glanced up his cuff, and removed a piece of crayfish from there.

So, was he ever an engineer? Perhaps, it was just a lie? How completely different he seemed in mentality from the stereotype engineer who

you associated with machines, metal and draughts! He was more like an actor or unfrocked priest. He knew himself that his audience did not believe him. He even spoke with an ironic twinkle in his eyes.

The fat little preacher would appear first in one bar, then in another. One day he got so carried away that he actually climbed onto a table... Clumsy and unrehearsed at such antics, he clambered across people's heads, grabbing hold of palm leaves; after bottles had been smashed, and a palm knocked over, he managed to steady himself on the table and, brandishing two empty mugs like dumbbells, started to shout:

"Here I am standing up on high, observing my gathering army. Come here! Come here! My host is great! Little actors dreaming of fame! Unhappy lovers! Old maids! Accountants! Ambitious men! Fools! Knights! Cowards! Come here! Your king has arrived — Ivan Babichev! The time is not yet ripe but soon, soon, we shall act... Come over to me, my army!"

He flung down his mug, grabbed an accordion out of someone's hands, and hung it over his paunch. The groaning sound he produced from it caused a furore; paper napkins flew to the ceiling...

People in aprons and oilcloth sleeves rushed out from behind the counter.

"Beer! Beer! Give us more beer! Give us a barrellful of beer! We must drink to the great events!"

But instead of being given more beer, the whole company was kicked out into the darkness and Ivan the preacher, the smallest of them all, but heavy and hard to push about, ended

up being chased out last. From pigheadedness and rage he had suddenly acquired the weight and dead inertia of an iron barrel of oil.

His bowler was spitefully pulled down over his eyes.

He went off down the street, tottering this way and that, as if he were being pushed from one pair of hands to another, and emitting plaintive half-wailing, half-singing sounds, much to the indignation of passers-by.

"Ophelia!" he sang. "Ophelia!" Just this one word but it swept over his way and seemed to soar over the streets, quickly tracing a shiny figure of eight.

That evening he went over to visit his famous brother. Two were seated at the table. Opposite each other. A lamp with a green shade stood between them. They were his brother Andrei, and Volodya. The latter was asleep with his head on a book. Ivan, drunk, staggered towards the sofa. For a long time he tried in vain to pull the sofa under him like you do a chair.

"You're drunk, Ivan", said his brother.

"I hate you," replied Ivan. "You're an idol."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Ivan! Lie down and sleep. I'll give you a cushion. Take your bowler off."

"You don't believe a single word I say. You're a thickhead, Andrei! Don't interrupt me! Or I'll break that lamp over Volodya's head. Be quiet. Why don't you believe Ophelia exists? Why don't you believe I've invented a marvellous machine?"

"You haven't invented anything, Ivan! It's just an obsessive idea you've got. Why do you tease me like this? It's nasty of you. You ought

to be ashamed of yourself! I mean, you take me for a fool. So what sort of machine is it? Such a machine is technically impossible. And why call it Ophelia? And why do you wear a bowler? Who are you — a rag-and-bone man or an ambassador?"

Ivan said nothing. Then, as if suddenly sobering, he got up and, clenching his fists, strode towards his brother:

"You don't believe me? You don't, do you? Andrei, stand up when you're being addressed by the leader of an army of many millions. How dare you not to believe me! You say there's no such machine? Andrei, I promise you, that machine will cause your death!"

"Stop making a row!" replied his brother. "You'll wake Volodya."

"I don't give a damn about your Volodya. I know, I know your plans. You want to marry my daughter off to Volodya. You want to breed a new strain. My daughter's not an incubator. You won't get her. I won't give her to Volodya. I'll strangle her with my own hands first."

He paused. Then, with a glint in his eyes, he shoved his hands in his pockets as if to support his sagging paunch, and said in a voice full of spite:

"You're quite wrong, my dear brother! You're pulling the wool over your own eyes. Ha-ha, you dear man. You reckon you love Volodya because Volodya's a new kind of man? Rubbish, Andrei, rubbish... It's not like that at all... No, it's quite different."

"What is it then?" thundered Andrei.

"It's just that you're getting old, Andrei! And you need a son. And you have paternal

feelings. The family is eternal, Andrei! And your attempt to make a quite unremarkable young man, famous only on a football pitch into a symbol of the new world is quite absurd..."

Volodya looked up.

"Hello, Edison of the new age!" exclaimed Ivan. "Hurrah!" and he bowed grandly.

Volodya gazed at him in silence. Ivan guffawed.

"What is it, Edison? You don't believe Ophelia exists either?"

"You need treatment at a mental institution, Ivan Petrovich," said Volodya, yawning.

Andrei gave a short whinny.

Then the preacher hurled his bowler on the floor, and yelled, "Scum!" And then after a pause, "Andrei! How can you let him? Why do you allow this ward of yours to insult your brother?"

Ivan looked up but he could not see his brother's eyes, only his shiny lenses.

"Ivan," said Andrei. "Would you please never come here again. You aren't insane. You're a swine."

III

Stories began to spread about the new preacher.

Rumours swept from bars to apartments, creeping through back entrances into communal kitchens: in the mornings while people were washing, lighting primus stoves, watching the milk trying to run over, or jigging under taps, they would all tittle-tattle.

The gossip penetrated offices, rest homes, markets.

A story was going around about a complete stranger turning up for the wedding party at a tax collector's house in Yakimanka Street. (From the detailed description it emerged he was in a bowler, scruffy, suspicious-looking, and it could only have been Ivan Babichev.) He appeared when the party was in full swing, and asked for attention so as to deliver an address to the newly-weds:

"You must not love one another. You must not be united. Groom, forsake your bride! What fruit will your love bring you? You will introduce your own enemy into the world. He'll gobble you up."

The groom tried to punch him. The bride fainted. The guest left, feeling insulted, and apparently it was then discovered that the port in all the bottles on the wedding table had turned to water.

Then, there was another amazing story circulating.

A respectable-looking, corpulent, ruddy-cheeked citizen with a briefcase on his lap was being driven through a very noisy part of the city (some said it was Neglinnaya Street near Kuznetski Most, others Tverskaya Street near Strastnoi Monastery).

And apparently the same notorious Ivan, catching sight of his brother in the car, dashed out of the crowd on the pavement, and stood in the car's way with arms outstretched like a scarecrow on a vegetable plot or like someone trying to stop a bolting horse by frightening it. The driver managed to slow down in time and

then blew his horn as he continued to roll slowly forward but the scarecrow refused to budge.

"Stop!" shrieked the man at the top of his voice. "Stop, commissar. Stop, child-abductor!"

And there was nothing left for the driver to do but put on his brakes. The stream of traffic came to a halt. Many cars nearly reared as they stopped short of the car in front, and a bus came to a stop with a screech and a shudder, nervous and ready to give in — get on his elephantine tyres and retreat...

With outstretched arms the man in the middle of the road demanded silence.

And so all went quiet.

"Brother," said the man. "Why is it that you drive about in a car while I go on foot? Open the door, move over and let me get in. I'm also entitled to ride about in a car. You're a leader but so am I."

And sure enough, at these words people came running up to him from various directions: a few jumped out of the bus, others left the neighbouring beer bars, others still came rushing along from the boulevard. And when the man in the car, his brother, got up, looking even bigger standing up than he already was, he saw a human barricade before him.

So terrifying was he to look at that it seemed he was about to step forward and stride over the car, over the driver's back and onto the barricade, rolling them flat all the way along the street...

And then Ivan was raised over the crowd of partisans and carried along, swaying, dipping, rising up again; his bowler slipped right back, baring his large, open forehead of a tired man.

And then his brother Andrei grabbed hold

of the front of his trousers, pulled him down, and tossed him to a militiaman, saying, "Take him to the GPU!"

No sooner had these magic words been uttered than there was a flurry of movement as everything came out of a trance: spokes glinted, hubs began to spin, doors slammed, and all these actions, which had begun before everything had frozen, were in due course continued.

Ivan was held under arrest for ten days.

When he was released, his drinking chums asked him if it was true that he had been arrested by his brother in the street in such extraordinary circumstances. He roared with laughter.

"It's a lie. A legend. I was just arrested in a bar. I reckon they've been keeping watch on me for some time now. But, mind you, it's a good thing legends are already being invented. The end of an epoch, a transitional period, needs its own legends and stories. Well, I'm happy I'm going to be the hero of one of them. And there's going to be another legend about a machine called Ophelia... The epoch will die with my name on its lips. That is what I'm now concentrating my efforts on."

He was let out and told he would be deported next time. What could they accuse him of at the GPU?

"You called yourself a king, didn't you?" his interrogator queried.

"Yes ... the king of plebs."

"What does that mean?"

"You see, I'm opening the eyes of a whole big category of people..."

"What are you opening their eyes to?"

"I want them to understand their own doom."

"You said — a whole big category of people. Who exactly do you mean by that?"

"All those you refer to as decadents. Bearers of decadent ideas. If you'll allow me, I'll elaborate on that."

"I should be only too pleased..."

"A whole series of human feelings, as I see it, are to be done away with..."

"What feelings, for instance?"

"Pity, tenderness, pride, jealousy, love — in short, nearly all the feelings which comprise the soul of a person in this dying era. The era of socialism will create in place of these former feelings a whole new range of emotions."

"I see."

"I can tell you don't understand me. A Communist bitten by the serpent of jealousy is subject to persecution. And a Communist with a tender heart is also subject to persecution. The buttercup of pity, the lizard of ambition, the serpent of jealousy — all this flora and fauna must be driven from the heart of a new man.

"Please excuse me, I have a somewhat exalted way of speaking, which you might find a little sickly. Is it hard to follow? Thank you. Water? No. I don't want water... I like speaking in a beautiful manner..."

"We know that the grave of a Komsomol member who had committed suicide is adorned not only with his comrades' wreaths but also with their curses. A man of the new world calls suicide a decadent act whereas a man of the old world would say he had to kill himself to redeem his honour. Thus, we see that the new man is teaching himself to despise the traditional feelings which have been hallowed by poets and by

the muse of History herself. So that's how it is. I want to hold a final parade of these feelings."

"So this is what you refer to as 'a conspiracy of feelings'?"

"Yes. This is a conspiracy of feelings and I am its leader."

"Go on."

"Yes... I would like to get a certain number of people to rally round me... Do you understand me?"

"You see, it may be admitted that traditional feelings were beautiful. Examples of great love, say, for a woman or one's country. And that's not all! You have to agree that some memories of the past still affect you. They do, don't they? Well, I would like to..."

"...You know how it is — sometimes an electric bulb will go out suddenly. It's burdened out, you say. But if you shake this burned-out bulb, it'll light up again and go on glowing for a little while. A disaster is taking place inside the bulb. The tungsten filaments snap, but when the fragments make contact, life returns to the lamp. A short, unnatural, obviously doomed life — a fever, an excessively bright incandescence, a flash. Then darkness descends, life will not return, and only burned-out, dead filaments will jangle in the darkness. Do you understand me? But that quick flash is wonderful!"

"...I want to shake it... I want to shake the heart of the burned-out age, the lamp-heart, to make the fragments touch and produce a wonderful flash, just for a moment..."

"...I want to find representatives from what you call the old world. The feelings I have in mind are jealousy, love for a woman, ambition."

I want to find a fool so that I can say to you: here, comrades, is someone who represents that human condition known as 'stupidity'.

"...Many characters have acted out the comedy of the old world. The curtain is falling. The characters must gather downstage to sing the finale. I want to be the intermediary between them and the audience. I'm going to conduct the chorus and leave the stage last.

"I have been given the honour of directing the last parade of old human passions...

"Through the slits of her mask History is following us with twinkling eyes. And I want to say to her: look, here is a lover, here's an ambitious man, here's a traitor, here's a fecklessly brave man, here's a loyal friend and here's a prodigal son — here they all are, the bearers of great feelings, which are now considered petty and vulgar. For the very last time, before they vanish forever, before they are exposed to ridicule, let them be seen in a flash of great intensity.

"I listen in to someone's conversation about a razor. About some madman who's cut his throat. A woman's name is mentioned in passing. He did not kill himself, the madman, his throat's been sewn up, but he's slashed it open again. Who is he? Show me, I need him, I'm looking for him. And I'm looking for her too. Her, the demonic woman, and him, the tragic lover. But where shall I look for him? In Moscow General Hospital? And what about her? Is she an office girl? Or one of the nouveaux riches?

"I find it very hard to track down heroes... There are no heroes... I look through people's

windows, go up people's staircases. Once in a while I'll run after someone's smile, skipping along like an entomologist after a butterfly! I long to shout out: 'Stop! What sort of blossom is on the bush whence came the delicate and flighty butterfly of your smile? What feeling does the bush represent? The pink wild rose of sorrow or the blackcurrent bush of petty ambition? Stop! I need you...'

"I want to gather a whole host around me. So as to be able to make a selection and choose the best, the brightest and produce what I suppose you could call a crack force of feelings.

"Yes, this is a conspiracy, a peaceful insurrection. A peaceful demonstration of feelings.

"Let's say, somewhere I seek out a full-blooded, one-hundred-percent ambitious person and I say to him: 'Show what you're worth.' Show those who don't give you a chance, show them what ambition is all about. Do something which will be talked about as absolutely vile ambition! Powerful ambition! Or, say, I'm fortunate enough to meet a perfectly frivolous person. I'll also say to him: 'Show yourself for what you're worth, show the force of frivolity so that your audience gasp in horror...'

"The genii of feelings take possession of souls. The genius of pride governs one soul, the genius of compassion — another. I want to withdraw them, these demons, and let them out in the ring."

Interrogator: "Well, and have you managed to find anyone yet?"

Ivan: "I've called and searched for a long

time. It's very hard. Maybe they don't understand me. But I have found one."

Interrogator: "Who is he exactly?"

Ivan: "Do you want to know the feeling he represents, or his name?"

Interrogator: "Both."

Ivan: "Nikolai Kavalеров. Envy."

IV

They walked away from the mirror.

Now the two comics walked together. The shorter and fatter one walked a step ahead of the other. This was a quirk of Ivan Babichev's. While holding a conversation with someone, he had to keep glancing round. If he had to say a long sentence (and his sentences were never short), while he strode along with his face turned towards his companion, he would keep bumping into people coming the other way. Whereupon he would take off his bowler and launch into high-flown apologies. He was a courteous man; he always had a friendly smile on his face.

The day was shutting up shop. A gypsy in a dark-blue waistcoat, with rouged cheeks and a beard, was carrying a shiny copper bowl on one shoulder. The day was retiring on the gypsy's shoulder. The bowl's disc was bright and dazzling. The gypsy was walking slowly along, the bowl was swaying gently and the day was revolving in the disc.

The two companions gazed after it.

And the disc vanished like the sun. The day was over.

The two men at once turned into a bar.

Kavalerov told Ivan about how an important person had kicked him out of his house. He did not mention his name. Ivan told him about also being kicked out by an important person.

"And you most likely know him. Everyone does. He's my brother, Andrei Petrovich Babichev. Heard of him?"

Kavalerov blushed, looked down, and said nothing in reply.

"Our fates are similar, so we must be friends," said Ivan, beaming. "And I like the name Kavalerov: it sounds bombastic and plebeian."

Kavalerov thought, "That's just what I am — bombastic and plebeian."

"What wonderful beer!" exclaimed Ivan. "The Poles sometimes say of a woman: she's got eyes the colour of beer. That's good, don't you think?"

"But the main thing is that this famous person, my brother, has stolen my daughter... I'll get my own back on him. He's stolen my daughter. Well, he hasn't stolen her literally, of course... Don't goggle like that, Kavalerov. And it wouldn't harm you to make your nose smaller either. With a big nose like yours you ought to be famous — some hero or other — in order to be happy as an ordinary Philistine. He's exerted moral pressure on her. And do you know I could take him to court for that? She's left me. I don't even blame Andrei as much as the bastard who's living with him."

He started speaking about Volodya.

Kavalerov's toes twitched with embarrassment.

"...That upstart of a boy has ruined my life.

Oh, if only he'd got his kidneys bashed out during a football match! Andrei follows his advice on everything. He calls that young idiot a new man! That snivelling lad said that Valya was unhappy because I, her father, was insane and that I (the bastard!) was systematically driving her mad. Bastard! They talked her into it together. And so she ran away. Some girlfriend's letting her stay with her.

"I cursed this friend of hers. I told her I hoped her gullet and back passage got mixed up. Can you imagine that? They're a load of thickheads...

"Woman was the best, purest and most beautiful creation of our culture. I sought for a being of the female sex. I sought for a being in whom all the qualities of a woman would be combined. I sought for the quintessence of feminine qualities. Femininity used to be glorified in the old days. I wanted to make this femininity shine forth. We're dying, Kavalerov. I wanted to carry woman above my head like a torch. I believed woman would be extinguished along with our era. The past looks like a cesspool in which machines, scraps of pig-iron, tin, odd screws and springs are strewn about... A dark gloomy cesspool. And all that's shining from the depths of the pit is rot, phosphorescent fungi, and mold. These are our feelings! This is all that's left of our feelings, of the flowering of our souls. The new man comes up to the pit, fumbles round, crawls into it, chooses what he needs — a useful machine part or maybe a screw — and then tramples down the shining rot and extinguishes it. I dreamed of finding a woman who would blossom in this

pit with an unprecedented feeling, like the beautiful blossom of a fern. Then the new man coming to steal our iron would take fright, pull out his hand, and close his eyes, dazzled by the light of what he thought was rot.

"And I've found such a being right beside me — Valya. I thought that Valya would shine out over the dying age, lighting up its way to the great cemetery. But I was wrong. She's flitted away. She has deserted the bedside of the old age. I thought woman was ours, that tenderness and love were only ours but, you see, I was wrong. And so here I am, the last dreamer on earth, tottering along the edges of the pit like a wounded bat..."

Kavalerov thought: "I'll take Valya away from them." He wanted to say that he had witnessed the incident in the side-street with the flowering hedge but for some reason or other did not.

"Our fates are similar," Ivan continued. "Give me your hand. That's right. Welcome! I'm very glad to see you, young man. Cheers. So you've been kicked out too, Kavalerov? Tell me, tell me about it. Oh, but you've already told me. A very important person's kicked you out? You don't want to name him? All right then. Do you hate this man very much?"

Kavalerov nodded.

"Oh, how I understand, friend! You, as far as I can see, have spoken your mind to an influential man. Don't interrupt. You have come to hate a man who is regarded as a celebrity by one and all. It seems to you, of course, that it was he who insulted you. Don't interrupt. Drink.

"...You are sure that he's preventing you from proving yourself, that he's stolen your rights, that where, in your opinion, you should be excelling, he is. And you're furious..."

The orchestra was hovering in the smoke. The violinist's pale face was lying on his violin.

"The violin looks like the violinist," said Ivan. "It's a little violinist in a wooden tailcoat. Hear that? It's the wood singing. Can you hear the wood's voice? The wood in an orchestra sings in different voices. But how badly they're playing! Oh Lord, how badly they're playing!"

He turned towards the musicians.

"You reckon you've got a drum? You reckon that's the drum playing its part? No, its the god of music thumping his fist threateningly at you."

"...My friend, we're being consumed with envy. We envy the new era. If you like, it's the envy of old age. It's the envy of the first generation of mankind to grow old. Let's talk about envy. Give us some more bear..."

They were sitting by a wide window.

It had rained again. It was evening. The city was sparkling just like it were carved out of Cardiff coal. People peered in through the window from Samotechnaya Square, pressing their noses against the glass.

"...Yes, envy. A drama must be played out here, one of those magnificent dramas in the theatre of History which will evoke tears, accolades, regrets and anger for years to come. Without even realising it, you yourself are a bearer of a historical mission. You are, so to say, a clot of envy. A clot of envy of the dying epoch. The dying epoch envies what is taking its place."

"What shall I do, then?" asked Kavalеров.

"My dear, you'll either have to reconcile yourself to things or cause a stir. Or go out with a bang. Slam the lid on it, as they say. That's the main thing: to go out with a bang. So that History's left with a scar on her mug. Show 'em, damn it! After all, the way into the future is barred for you anyway. Don't give up without a fight... I want to tell you about a certain episode from my childhood...

"We had an evening ball. The children put on a play and performed a ballet on a stage which had been erected for the purpose in the large drawing-room. And a little girl — try to imagine her — an ordinary girl, aged twelve, with bony legs, a short little dress, all pink, satin, ribbons and bows, just like a snapdragon — a stuck-up spoilt little madam, tossing her curls, was the central figure at the ball. She was the queen. She did everything she liked, everyone was in raptures over her, she was at the focus of attention and everyone was drawn towards her. She danced, sang, pranced, and invented games better than any of the other children. She got the best presents, the best sweets, flowers, oranges, compliments... I was a thirteen-year-old schoolboy. She had stolen the limelight from me, for, you see, I was also used to compliments, and I was also spoiled with admiration. I was also top of my class and a record-setter. I could not stand it. I caught the girl in the corridor and roughed her up, pulled out her ribbons, shook loose her curls and scratched her pretty little face. Then I grabbed her by the back of the head and banged her forehead several times against

a column. At that moment I loved this girl more than life itself, worshipped her — and hated her with all my guts. By shaking loose the pretty doll's curls, I reckoned I'd disgrace her, spoil her rosiness and her shine, and I reckoned I had put right the mistake everyone else had made. But nothing of the sort. The shame fell on me, I was kicked out. Still, my dear, I was remembered all evening, and it was I who spoiled the party for them all and was talked about everywhere the little girl appeared... That is how I experienced envy for the first time. The sting of envy is dreadfully painful. How hard it is to envy! Envy throttles you, squeezes your eyes out of their sockets. As I was roughing my captive up in the corridor, tears rolled down my cheeks and I was choking but I still ripped her delightful clothes, shuddering at the feel of the satin — it nearly set my teeth on edge and made my lips quiver. You know what satin is like, the feel of it sends shivers up your spine, and all over you, and makes you wince terribly! So, every force there is rose up against me to defend the beastly girl. A poison that had been concealed in bushes and baskets, issued forth from what in the drawing-room had seemed so charmingly innocent — from her dress, from the pink satin material which was so sweet to look at. I don't remember whether I said anything as I was carrying out my reprisal. I probably whispered: 'This is my way of getting back at you! Don't you try and outshine me! Don't try to take away what's mine...'

"Were you listening attentively to me? I want to draw a comparison. I have in mind the

struggle between the two ages. Of course, at first glance the comparison will seem flippant. But do you understand me? I'm talking of envy."

The musicians finished playing.

"Well, thank heavens," said Ivan. "They've stopped. Look at the cello. It was much less shiny before it was used. It was tortured a long time. Now it's shining as though it were damp — it's now a refreshed cello. You ought to jot down my comments, Kavalero. I don't talk — I carve my words in marble. Don't you agree?..

"My dear, we were record-setters. We, too, have been spoiled with admiration. We, too, were used to leading back there... Where's there?.. In the waning age. Oh, how wonderful the new world is! Oh, what a fantastic ball there'll be in the place they won't let us in! Everything's coming from it, from the new age, everything's drawn to it; it will receive the best gifts and compliments. I love it, this world advancing upon me, more than life itself, I revere it, and I hate it with all my guts! I am choking and tears are pouring down my cheeks in torrents but I still want to lay my hands on its clothes and tear them to shreds. Don't you try and outshine me! Don't try to take away what's mine...

"We've got to avenge ourselves. Both you and I — and thousands of others like us — we must avenge ourselves. Kavalero, enemies don't always turn out to be windmills. Sometimes what you'd very much like to take for a windmill is, in fact, an enemy, a conqueror bringing death and destruction. Your enemy, Kavalero, is quite real. Avenge yourself. Believe me, we shall go out with a bang. We'll knock the

young world down a peg or two. We'll show them what we're made of. We, too, were the pets of History.

"Make them talk about you, Kavalеров. It's obvious everything's headed for destruction, everything's doomed and there's no way out — you're going to perish, fat-nose! Every minute will add to your humiliations, with every day the enemy will blossom like a pampered youth. You will perish — that's obvious. So, glamorize your death, liven it up with fireworks, rip up the clothes of whoever's trying to outshine you, and take your leave in such a way that your goodbye will echo through the centuries."

Kavalеров thought: "He can read my mind."

"You were insulted? Kicked out?"

"I was terribly insulted," Kavalеров replied excitedly, "I was humiliated for a long time."

"Who's offended you? One of the age's chosen few?"

"Your brother," Kavalеров wanted to explain, "the same one who has insulted you as well." But he said nothing.

"You're lucky. You know your enemy personally. He's someone real. Mine is too."

"But what shall I do?"

"You're lucky. While avenging yourself, you may also avenge the age which gave birth to you."

"But what shall I do?"

"Kill him. Leave a hallowed memory of yourself as the hired assassin of the age. Squash your enemy on the threshold between the two ages. He's so proud of himself, he reckons he's already there, he's a genius, a cupid hovering with a scroll at the gates of the new world;

he's already stuck his nose in the air and pretends he can't see you. Bump him off before you go. I give you my blessing. And I (Ivan raised his mug), I am also going to destroy my enemy. Let us drink, Kavalеров, to Ophelia, my weapon of revenge."

Kavalеров opened his mouth to say the main thing: we have a common enemy, you have given me your blessing to murder your brother. But he said nothing because a man came up to their table and invited Ivan to follow him immediately, no questions asked. He had been arrested, as is known from the previous chapter.

"Goodbye, my dear," said Ivan, "I'm being led to Golgotha. Go to my daughter (he named the side-street which had been glowing in Kavalеров's memory for a long time), go and have a look at her. Then you'll understand that if such a creature has betrayed us, the only thing left is revenge!"

He downed his beer and walked off a step ahead of the mysterious stranger.

As he went, he winked and lavished smiles at customers, peered into the clarinet's bell-mouth, and by the door turned round, and with his bowler in his outstretched hand de-claimed:

*"I'm no German charlatan,
Bound to raise your suspicion.
I'm a simple Soviet stuntman,
I'm a present-day magician!"*

"What are you laughing at? Do you reckon I'm falling asleep?" asked Volodya.

"I'm not laughing, I'm coughing."

And Volodya started dozing off again as soon as he got to a chair.

The young man tired sooner. The older one, Andrei Babichev, was unbeatable. He worked all day and half the night as well. He would bang his fist on the table, and the lampshade would jump like the lid of a kettle but the other one would sleep on. The lampshade jumped and Andrei thought of James Watt watching the kettle lid jumping above the steam.

A famous story, a famous scene.

James Watt had invented the steam engine.

"So, what are you going to invent, my James Watt? What machine are you going to invent? What new secret of nature are you, new man, going to discover?"

And then Andrei would start up a conversation with himself. For a very short while he stopped working, gazed at Volodya asleep, and thought:

"Maybe Ivan's right after all? Maybe, I'm nothing but an ordinary Philistine and what I value is family feelings? Am I fond of him because he's lived with me ever since he was a child? Is it that I've simply got used to him and come to love him as a son? Is that the only reason? Is it really that simple? But what if he had been stupid? Everything my life stands for has been concentrated in him. I've been lucky. The life of a new mankind is still a long way off. I believe in it. And I have been lucky.

Here he is asleep so close to me, my fine new world. A new world is living in my house. I dote on him. A son? A mainstay? Someone to be with me when I die? No, that's not true! I don't need that! I don't want to die on a high bed, propped up by pillows. I know the masses and not my family will be with me when I take my last breath. Nonsense! I cherish him as we all cherish this new world. And he is dear to me like hope incarnate. I'll kick him out if I'm wrong about him, if he's not new, if he's not quite different from me who is up to his belly in the old world and unable to climb out any longer. I'll kick him out then: I don't need a son, I'm not his father and he's not my son, we're not a family. I am the one who believed in him and he is the one who justified that belief.

"We're not a family, we're mankind.

"So what does it mean? Does it go to show that the human emotion of paternal love should be eliminated? Why does he love me, this new man? Is it proof that in the new world, love between father and son will also flourish? In that case, I have every reason to rejoice and can rightfully love him both as a son and as a new man. Ivan, Ivan, your conspiracy is meaningless. Not all feelings are doomed. There's no point in you fuming, Ivan!"

Long, long ago on a dark night, tumbling down water-filled gullies, knee-deep in stars, frightening more stars from the bushes, two people ran away: a Commissar and a boy. The boy saved the Commissar. The Commissar was huge, the boy tiny. If anyone had seen them, they would have thought that a giant was run-

ning along, every now and then hurling himself to the ground and getting up again, and they would have mistaken the boy for the giant's hand.

They were united forever.

The boy lived at the giant's and when he grew up, he joined the Komsomol and became a student. He was the son of a foundry worker, born in a railway workers' settlement.

He was popular both among his fellow students and among adults. He sometimes worried about everyone liking him — at times he felt it was undeserved and wrong. His strongest feeling was that of comradeship. As though concerned about redressing some kind of balance and trying to compensate for an injustice committed by nature in the distribution of gifts, he would sometimes even resort to various tricks so as to play down people's impression of him and dim his shine.

He wanted to reward his less successful peers with his devotion, readiness to sacrifice himself, with ardent displays of friendship and with the discovery in each of remarkable features and talents. His company impelled his friends to be competitive.

"I've been thinking about why people get angry or feel hurt," he once said. "It's because such people have no concept of time. They're ignorant about technology. Time is also, you see, a technical concept. If everyone was technical-minded, anger, vanity and all other petty feelings would disappear. You're smiling? The point is that one has to understand time in order to get rid of petty feelings. A grudge, for instance, may last an hour or a year. People

have enough imagination to make it last that long. But they can't keep it up for a thousand years. They only see three or four divisions on the clock face, they crawl, butt into each other... They're not up to it! They can't conceive of the clock face as a whole. In fact, if you tell them there's a clock face at all, they won't believe you!"

"But why only petty feelings? Lofty feelings are short-lived, too. I mean, what about magnanimity, say?"

"Well... If you ask me, there's a sort of ... technical correctness about being magnanimous. Don't smile. I mean it. No, actually, I think I've got something wrong. You're confusing me. No, wait! There was a revolution ... and what was it like? Very cruel, you're right there. Yes, but why did it have to be cruel? Because it was magnanimous, right? It was kind as far as the whole clock face was concerned. You agree? One should not take offense at what lies between two divisions but only at the things that are wrong for the clock face as a whole... Then there's no distinction between cruelty and magnanimity. Then there's only one thing: Time. The iron logic of History, as it's called. And History and Time are one and the same — twins. Don't laugh, Andrei Petrovich. What I'm saying is that man's main feeling ought to be an understanding of time."

He also said:

"I'll take the bourgeois world down a peg or two. They're poking fun at us. Their old gaffers keep jabbering: where are your new engineers, surgeons, professors, inventors? I'll get together a large group of friends — a

hundred or so people, and we'll organise a union for pulling the bourgeois world down a peg or two. You reckon I'm boasting? You don't understand a thing. I'm not showing off at all. We're going to work like mad. You'll see. They'll come to pay their respects to us. Valya's going to be in this union also."

He woke up.

"I had a dream," he said with a laugh. "Valya and I were sitting together on the roof and looking at the moon through a telescope."

"What? Mmm? A telescope?"

"And I said to her: 'See that down below, that's the Sea of Crises.' And she asked, 'The Sea of Mices?'"

That spring Volodya went away for a short while to visit his father in the town of Murom. His father worked at a train-building factory in Murom. Thus, two lonely days passed and on the following night, as Andrei was driving home, his driver slowed down at a bend and in the vague light of dawn Andrei caught sight of a man lying by a wall.

The man lying on the grating reminded him of his absent friend. He felt compelled to sit up and lean towards his driver. "But they've nothing in common!" Andrei nearly blurted out. And there really was nothing similar about the man lying there and his absent young friend. He could simply see Volodya very well in his mind's eye. Then he thought: "Now what if something or other caused Volodya to look as pitiful as this." And then he did a foolish thing and gave in to his sentimental notion.

Nikolai Kavaleroov was picked up and his delirious words were heard.

Andrei brought him home, dragged him up to the second floor, made up Volodya's sofa, laid him down and covered him with a blanket. There he lay flat out with the crisscross, waffle-like grating marks on his cheek. His host went off happily to sleep: the sofa was no longer empty.

And that night he dreamed that the young man had hung himself on a telescope.

VI

There was a wonderful bed in Anna Propkovich's room. It was made of expensive wood and varnished with dark-red laquer, and the insides of its boards were decorated with mirror-arcs.

One day, in a profoundly peaceful year, at a local carnival, Anna's husband, sprinkled with confetti, mounted a wooden stage to the sound of a fanfare, showed his lottery ticket and was presented by the compere with a receipt entitling him to claim the wonderful bed. A cart was used to take it away. Boys whistled after it.

The blue sky was reflected in the swaying mirror-arcs, like a pair of beautiful eyes, opening and then closing slowly.

The couple lived together until death parted them, but the bed survived all kinds of storms.

Kavalerov now lived in a corner behind the bed.

He had come to Anna and said:

"I can pay you thirty roubles a month for a corner."

Smiling coyly, Anna had agreed.

He had nowhere else to go. A new tenant had got well and truly settled in his old room.

Kavalerov had sold his horrible bed for four roubles and it had groaned as it left him.

Anna's bed looked like an organ. It took up half the room. Its pinnacles hovered in the dusk of the ceiling.

Kavalerov used to think:

"If I were a child, Anna's little boy, how many poetic and magic designs my childish mind would have conjured up, inspired by the sight of such an extraordinary object! Now I am an adult and I can catch only the vague outlines and a few separate details but then I could have...

"...But then, bound by neither distance, scale, time, weight, nor gravity, I would have crawled along the corridors formed by the empty spaces between the springy mattress and the sides of the bed. And I would have hidden behind the columns which now seem no bigger than specimen bottles; I would have set up make-believe catapults on its sideboards and fired at my enemies, who would have been thoroughly exhausted by their running retreat across the soft squelchy soil of the blanket; I would have held receptions for envoys under the mirror-arc, like the king in the story I had just read. I would have set off on fantastic journeys through its carvings, climbing higher and higher, up the legs and bottoms of cupids, climbing them just like one would a statue of Buddha, seeing only bits of it at once. And from the last arc, from a dizzy height, I would have plunged into the terrifying abyss, the icy-white abyss of pillows..."

Ivan Babichev is leading Kavaleroﬀ along a green mound... Dandelion fluff is flying up from under their feet and drifting along: and its drifting is in itself a dynamic reflection of the heat... The heat has made Babichev's face pale. His round face is shining as though the heat were moulding a mask out of it.

"This way!" he orders.

The outskirts of the city are in bloom.

They cross a patch of wasteland, go along the fences; dogs bark ferociously behind the fences, rattling their chains. Kavaleroﬀ whistles, teasing the dogs. But anything may happen: one of them may just manage to break its chain and leap over the fence, and that's why a capsule of terror keeps dissolving in the pit of the teaser's stomach.

The travellers go down the green slope, almost onto the roofs of the little red houses and the tree-tops in the orchards. This area is unfamiliar to Kavaleroﬀ, and even with Krestovski Towers ahead he cannot get his bearings. They can hear the whistles of steam-engines and the clanking of trains.

"I'll show you my machine," says Ivan, glancing round at Kavaleroﬀ. "Pinch yourself — that's right, and again, and again... It isn't a dream, is it? Remember — you weren't asleep. Remember — it was all simple — you and I walked across a patch of wasteland, a puddle was shimmering — the kind which never dries out, there were pots drying on top of a wattle fence. Remember, my friend, the remarkable things it was possible to notice among the rubbish in ditches under the fences along the way: for instance, look — there's a page from a book —

bend down and have a look at it before the wind blows it away — see! — illustrations to Gogol's *Taras Bulba*, recognise them? Someone most likely used it to wrap some food in and then threw it out of that window over there, and the page landed up here. What have we over here? The eternal, traditional boot in a ditch? It's not worth looking at — it's too academic a symbol of destitution! There's a bottle... Wait, it's still whole but tomorrow the wheel of a cart will smash it, and if some other day-dreamer comes our way soon, he will have the complete satisfaction of contemplating the famous bottle glass, the famous fragments celebrated by writers for being able to suddenly glint among the rubbish and waste, and create all kinds of mirages for lonely travellers... Look, my friend, look... Here are buttons, hoops, there's a shred of bandage, there are little Babylon Towers of fossilized human excrement... In a word, my friend, the typical scenery of a wasteland... Remember it. It was all simple. And I was bringing you here in order to show you my machine. Pinch yourself. That's it. So, it isn't a dream? Well, all right then. Otherwise later — I know how it'll be later — you'll say you didn't feel well, it was too hot, and that possibly you simply imagined a lot of things because of the heat or because you were tired, and so on. No, my friend, I demand you assure me you are feeling perfectly normal. What you are about to see may give you too great a shock."

Kavalerov replied:

"I feel perfectly normal."

And then there was a fence, a low plank fence.

"It's in there," said Ivan. "Wait. Let's sit down. Over here, above the gully. I've already told you that my dream was a machine of machines, a universal machine. I thought of creating a perfect instrument, I hoped to combine hundreds of different functions in one small apparatus. Yes, my friend. A wonderful, noble task. For this it was worth becoming a fanatic: I decided to tame the mastodon of technology, turn it into a household pet that would eat out of your hand ... and give man this most simple of machines which he wouldn't be afraid of, which would be as familiar to him as a door-knob..."

"I understand nothing about mechanics," said Kavalero, "I'm afraid of machines."

"And I've done it. Listen, will you, Kavalero. I've invented just such a machine."

(The fence looked enticing, and yet, most likely, no secret whatsoever lay behind the ordinary grey planks.)

"It can blow up mountains. It can fly. It can pick up heavy loads. It can crush ore. It can replace a cooker, a children's pram, a long-range gun... It is the genius of mechanics..."

"Why are you smiling, Ivan Petrovich?"

(Ivan's eyes were twinkling.)

"I'm thrilled. I can't talk about it without my heart bouncing about like an egg in boiling water. Listen to me. I've given it hundreds of skills. I have invented a machine which can do everything. Do you understand? Now you'll see it but..."

He stood up and laying his hand on Kavalero's shoulder, said solemnly:

"But I won't let it. One day I realised that

I had been given the supernatural chance to avenge my epoch... I have perverted the machine. On purpose. Out of spite."

He shook with merry laughter.

"No, just try to understand, Kavalero, what great satisfaction I got. I have given the most vulgar human feelings to the greatest technical creation! I have disgraced the machine. I have avenged my century which gave me my brain that has invented a wonderful machine... Who should I have left it to? To the new world? They're devouring us like food: they're stuffing the nineteenth century down their throats like a boa constrictor finishing off a rabbit... They're chewing and digesting us. All the useful bits, they absorb, all the harmful bits, they reject... They reject our feelings, absorb our technology! I am avenging our feelings. They won't get my machine, they won't utilize me, they won't absorb my brain... My machine could bring the new century happiness, and make technology blossom, instantly, right from the very start. But no, they won't get it! My machine is a flashing tongue-in-cheek, which the dying century will show to the new one. Their mouths will water when they set eyes on it. A machine, just think of it, their idol, a machine ... and suddenly ... and suddenly the best of machines turns out to be a vulgar liar, and a sentimental rogue! Come on ... I'll show you... This machine which can do everything now whiles away the time singing our love ballads, our silly old love ballads and gathering flowers of the old century. It falls in love, feels jealous, cries, has dreams at night... I've done all this. I've made a travesty of the deity of these new

people, the machine. And I've given it the name of a girl who lost her sanity through love and despair — Ophelia... The most human, the most touching name of all..."

Ivan dragged KavaleroV after him.

Ivan put his eye to a chink, presenting to KavaleroV his shiny brass-coloured buttocks which looked just like two dumbbells. Perhaps the heat, the strange deserted look of this unfamiliar landscape, so totally untypical of Moscow, all this really was affecting him, perhaps it was, indeed, a result of fatigue but the fact remains that KavaleroV, all alone in this wasteland, far away from the usual city noises, suddenly lost his sense of reality and had some kind of acoustic hallucination. He thought he could hear Ivan talking to someone through the chink. Then suddenly Ivan stepped back. And KavaleroV did the same although he was standing quite some way from Ivan. It was as though fear was lurking somewhere in the trees opposite and holding onto them by the same length of string, which it had just tugged.

"Who's whistling?" shouted KavaleroV, fear jingling in his voice.

A piercing whistle flew over the surrounding area. KavaleroV turned away sharply, covering his face with his hands as one would turn away from a sudden draught. Ivan shied away from the fence towards KavaleroV, taking short steps, and the whistle flew after him, as though Ivan was not running but sliding along, pierced through by a dazzling whistle beam.

"I'm afraid of it! I'm afraid of it!" KavaleroV heard Ivan whisper in a rasping voice.

Grabbing hold of each other's hand, they

tore downhill, accompanied by the curses of a tramp they had disturbed, whom from up there they had first mistaken for an old harness someone had thrown away...

The tramp, pulled by the collar out of his sleep, sat on a hummock, and rummaged in the grass for a stone. They disappeared down a narrow street.

"I'm afraid of it," Ivan kept saying hurriedly. "It hates me... It's betrayed me... It's going to kill me..."

Kavalerov, coming to his senses, felt ashamed of his cowardice. He recalled that at the very moment he had seen Ivan take to his heels, he had also become aware of something else, which, due to his fright, he had failed to register.

"Listen," he said, "what nonsense! It was just a boy whistling with two fingers. I saw him. He appeared on the fence and whistled. Yes, a boy..."

"I told you," smiled Ivan, "I told you you'd start looking for all sorts of explanations. And I asked you to pinch yourself as hard as you could."

Then they had an argument. Ivan turned into a bar which he found with difficulty. He did not invite Kavalerov, and so the latter wandered off, not knowing the way, and listening hard for the sound of a tramcar. But after getting as far as the next corner, Kavalerov stamped his foot and turned back towards the bar. Ivan greeted him with a smile and pointed towards a chair.

"Oh, do tell me," pleaded Kavalerov. "Do

tell me why you're tormenting me? What are you deceiving everyone for? There's no such machine! There cannot be such a machine. It's a lie and delirium! Why are you lying to us?"

Kavalerov dropped into a chair in exhaustion.

"Listen, Kavalerov. Order yourself a beer and I'll tell you a story. Listen!"

A TALE OF A MEETING BETWEEN TWO BROTHERS

"...The fragile, expanding frame of the Quarter was encased in scaffolding.

"Just like any other, the scaffolding consisted of girders, tiered planks, ladders, passages this way and that, and awnings, but the crowd which had gathered down below was made up of very different characters and faces. Even their smiles were different. Some who were inclined to simplicity said that the construction was covered with hatching. Someone else remarked:

"'Wooden structures are not supposed to be erected too high. It's no pleasure looking up at planks that are too high up. Scaffolding detracts from a building's splendour. The highest mast is usually easily damaged. Such a vast amount of wood is always fragile. One immediately thinks of the fire risk.'

"Another exclaimed:

"'But, on the other hand, look at those beams. They are stretched like strings. Like a guitar, just like a guitar!'

"To which the other replied:

"'Well, wasn't I saying that wood was

fragile? Its purpose is to serve music.'

"Whereupon someone else rejoined in an ironic tone:

" 'What about brass, then? I myself only like wind instruments.'

"A schoolboy found a mathematical equation in the arrangement of the planks which nobody else had noticed, but before he had managed to work out what the multiplication signs referred to or where the equal-signs led to, the similarity vanished in a trice: it was too brittle.

" 'The siege of Troy,' thought a poet. 'Besieged towers.'

"And the comparison was strengthened by the appearance of some musicians. Shielding their heads behind trumpets, they crawled into a sort of wooden trench at the foot of the structure.

"The evening was dark, the lanterns white and spherical, the banners bright red, the gaps under the wooden steps deathly black. The lanterns swayed to and fro, twanging on their wires. It was as though the shadows were raising and lowering their eyebrows. Gnats were flying about the lanterns and dying. The shapes of neighbouring houses, snatched up by the lanterns, swept in from a distance, causing the windows on the way to blink, and hurled themselves at the construction site. And (until the lanterns settled down again after being tossed about by the wind) the scaffolding came vigorously to life, every part of it set in motion, and, like a galleon in full sail, the construction steered towards the crowd.

"Andrei Babichev walked along a wooden

platform towards the wooden base of the building. A stage was spontaneously emerging there. The orator was given steps, a rostrum and a handrail, and also a dazzlingly black background, and a spotlight directly on him. Indeed, so much light was provided that even the distant viewers could see the level of the water in the carafe on the chairman's table.

"Babichev was moving over the crowd, very shiny and colourful like tin, and he looked like a mechanical toy. He was due to make a speech. Down below, in the natural shelter, actors were getting ready for their performance. An oboe, invisible and unintelligible to the crowd, was wailing sweetly. And also unintelligible was the drum's disc facing the crowd which had turned silver in the sharp lighting. The actors were putting their costumes on in the wooden canyon. Every time someone walked past overhead, a plank moved above them and a mist of sawdust descended.

"Babichev's appearance on the stage made the audience liven up. They took him for the compere. He was too fresh, deliberate and theatrical-looking.

"'Fattiel Oh, what a fattiel' someone in the crowd exclaimed in delight.

"Cries of 'bravo!' rang out.

"But as soon as someone in the chairman's committee officially gave Comrade Babichev the floor, all trace of hilarity vanished. Many stood on tiptoe, in tense anticipation. And everyone was thoroughly pleased. It was very pleasant to see Babichev for two reasons: firstly, because he was a famous man, and, secondly, because he was fat. Fatness makes a famous

man endearing. Babichev was given an ovation. Half the applause was in appreciation of his fatness. He delivered his speech.

"He spoke of the function of the Quarter — the number of meals, its catering capacity, nutrition statistics and the various advantages of communal catering.

"He spoke about children's food — the Quarter would have a children's section, about the scientific method of preparing milk porridge, about children's growth, spines and anaemia. Like all speakers, he gazed over the heads of the people in front, into the distance, and that is why throughout his speech he remained oblivious to what was going on underneath the platform. Yet for some time now a man in a bowler had been distracting the attention of the audience in front, and they had stopped listening to the speaker and were totally fascinated watching the man, who was, incidentally, behaving in a perfectly civilised manner. True, he had stepped out of the crowd and climbed over the rope in front of the stage, and was standing all by himself, which clearly indicated his rights of some kind, either proper or simply assumed... He stood with his back to the audience, leaning against the rope or, rather, hanging his bottom over it, and, unconcerned by the total chaos which would break out if the rope were to snap, he was swinging to and fro, perfectly serene, and obviously having fun.

"He was perhaps listening to the speaker or perhaps watching the actors. A ballerina's tutu kept flashing, and various funny mugs kept peeping through the small gap in the planks.

"Well, and... Of course! I nearly forgot to mention the most remarkable thing about it all! This most peculiar man had brought along a pillow, a large, old pillow in a yellow cover, which many heads had rested on. And once he had settled himself on the rope, he lowered the pillow onto the ground, and it sat down beside him like a pig.

"When the orator had finished his speech and while he was wiping his lips with his handkerchief and pouring water out of the carafe with his other hand, and while the applause died down and the audience's attention switched to the actors (whom they were getting ready to listen to and watch), the man with the pillow lifted his bottom off the rope, drew his short body up to full height, stretched out his hand holding the pillow, and shouted out loudly:

"'Comrades! Give me the floor!'

"It was only then that the orator caught sight of his brother, Ivan. His fists clenched. Meanwhile, Ivan began mounting the steps up to the stage. He was going up slowly. Someone from the chairman's committee rushed up to the railing. He intended stopping the stranger with gestures and words but his arm hung in the air and then lowered itself in jerks, as though marking off the stranger's steps upwards.

"'One ... two ... five ... ten...'

"'It's hypnosis!' came squeals from the crowd.

"But the stranger continued his ascent, carrying the pillow by the scruff of its neck. And then he was on the stage. A remarkable clockwork toy stood out against the black

background, a background as black as slate. A background so black that many even saw chalk lines criss-crossing it, producing a flickering effect. The toy stopped.

“‘A pillow!’ whispers were heard in the crowd.

“And then the stranger said:

“‘Comrades! They are trying to take your most valuable possession away from you: your homes. The steeds of the Revolution, their hooves pounding up back stairways, trampling your children and cats, will break into your kitchens, and smash your beloved cookers and bricks. Women — your pride and joy, your homes, are in danger! Mothers and wives, they went to send the elephants of the Revolution in to wreck your kitchens.

“‘What was he speaking about just now? He was poking fun at your pans, at your little pots, at your peace and quiet, at your right to shove a dummy into your child’s mouth... What’s he teaching you to forget? What’s he trying to knock out of your hearts? Your home — your sweet home! He wants to turn you into tramps roaming across the wild plains of History. Wives, he’s spitting in your soup. Mothers, he dreams of wiping the resemblance off your babies’ faces — that wonderful, hallowed family resemblance. He’s burrowing into your secret cubbyholes, scurrying about shelves like a rat, crawling under beds, under shirts, into the hair of your armpits. Send him to hell!.. Here’s a pillow. I am the king of pillows. Tell him: each of us wants to sleep on his own pillow. Hands off our pillows! As new-born babies, we rested our heads on these pillows,

our heads covered with dark fluffy down; our kisses fell on them during nights of love; we died on them — and those we killed, died on them also. Hands off our pillows! Stop appealing to us! Stop trying to entice us and seduce us. What can you offer us to replace our capacity to love, to hate, to hope, to cry, to pity and forgive?.. Here's a pillow. Our coat of arms. Our banner. Here's a pillow. Bullets get stuck in a pillow. With this pillow we shall smother you...'

"He broke off. As it was, he had already said too much. It was as though his last sentence had been seized hold of, just like an arm, and twisted behind his back. He stopped short, suddenly afraid, because the person he had been pulling to pieces was simply standing and listening to him in silence. The scene was just like something out of a show. And this is exactly what many people took it for. After all, actors often come on stage from the audience. And, besides, real actors were now appearing from a wooden shed. Yes, and then the ballerina fluttered out from behind the planks just like a butterfly. A clown in a monkey suit and a ginger wig climbed onto the stage, clinging with one hand to the bar and holding in the other a strange musical instrument — a huge, long trumpet with three bellmouths; and as you could expect anything from a man in a monkey suit and a ginger wig, the natural impression you got was that he was magically climbing up his own trumpet. Someone in a tailcoat was dashing about under the stage, rounding up the actors who had run off in different directions to catch a glimpse of the strange speaker. You

see, the actors also presumed that this was one of the variety artists who had been invited to take part in the concert and that it was his idea to make his entry on stage with a pillow and get into an argument with the speaker before starting his usual act. But no. The clown slid down his silly trumpet in fright! Pandemonium broke out. It was not the words the stranger had lavished on the audience which caused havoc. On the contrary, his speech was taken as a planned skit in the programme; it was the ensuing silence which made many people's skulls tighten under their hats.

“‘What are you staring at me for?’ asked the little man, dropping the pillow.

“The giant's voice (nobody knew it was brother speaking to brother), the giant's brief retort was heard by the whole square, windows, house entrances. Old people sat up in their beds.

“‘Who are you fighting against, you wretch?’ the giant asked.

“His face puckered up. It looked as though some dark liquid was about to pour out of it, like out of a wineskin, oozing out of its nostrils, lips, ears, eyes, and everyone would turn away in horror... It was not he who had spoken these words: it was the planks around him, the concrete, clamps, graphs and formulas which had sprung to life. It was their anger that was bursting him open.

“But brother Ivan did not recoil (they had all been expecting him to keep going back until he finally flopped down on his pillow) — on the contrary, he suddenly looked tougher, and straightening, he walked up to the railing,

shielding his eyes with his hand, and called: 'Where are you? I'm waiting for you, Ophelia!'

"A wind blew. In fact, there had been intermittent gusts of wind blowing all the time, causing the lanterns to sway. The audience had already grown accustomed to the shadows' patterns merging and dissolving (squares, bell-bottomed Pythagoras' triangles, Hippocrates' geometrical figures). And the many-decked galleon of the construction had kept pulling up anchor and rushing at the crowd. So, a new gust which jerked round many shoulders, pushed down many heads, would have been treated with the same annoyance and then instantly dismissed if it had not been for... And afterwards people said that *it* had flown past overhead and flown out from behind.

"The huge galleon was heading straight for the crowd, wood creaking, wind howling, when a black flying object struck a high beam, like a bird striking the rigging, smashed a lantern and soared away...

"'Are you afraid, brother?' asked Ivan. 'This is what I'm going to do. I'm going to make her attack the scaffolding. She'll destroy your building. The screws will unscrew themselves, the nuts will fall off, the concrete will start disintegrating like a leper's body. How do you like that? She'll teach every beam to disobey you. Well? Everything's going to collapse. She'll turn every single figure of yours into a useless flower. This, brother Andrei, is what I can do...'

"'Ivan, you're gravely ill. You're delirious, Ivan,' said the person who had been expected to explode, in a kind and gentle tone. 'Who are

you speaking about? Who's "she"? I can't see anything! Who's going to turn my figures into flowers? That was just the wind knocking a lantern against a beam and smashing it. Ivan, Ivan...'

"And Andrei stepped towards Ivan with outstretched arms. But Ivan brushed him aside.

"'Look!' he exclaimed, raising his arm. 'No, you're looking the wrong way... That's her ... to the left... Can you see? What's that sitting up there on that little girder? See? Drink some water. Pour Comrade Babichev some water... What's sitting up there on a perch? See?! Now you believe me?! You scared?!'

"'It's a shadow!' said Andrei. 'Brother, it's just a shadow. Let's go away from here. I'll drive you home. Let the concert start. The actors are getting restless. The audience is waiting. Let's go, Ivan, let's go.'

"'Oh, it's a shadow, is it? It's not a shadow, my dear Andrei. It's the machine you scoffed at... It's me sitting on the perch. Andrei, me, the old world, my century sitting up there. The brain of my century, Andrei, which knew how to compose songs as well as invent theorems. A brain full of dreams, all of which you want to destroy.'

"Ivan raised his arm and shouted:

"'Go, Ophelia! Go, I tell you!'

"And whatever was sitting on the girder, flashed as it turned and began rustling and shuffling like a bird at take-off, and then it slowly vanished in the dark gap between the cross-beams.

"There was a panic and a crush as people fled, screaming. And then it clanked as it plunged

through the girders. Then, all of a sudden it reappeared, emitting an orange beam of light, whistled, and a vague shape, a weightless shadow, crawled spider-like up a vertical side, into the tangle of girders, settled again on some sort of rib, and looked round...

"'Go on, Ophelia! Get cracking!' shouted Ivan, rushing about the stage. 'Did you hear what he said about homes? I command you to destroy the building...'

"People started fleeing, and their flight was accompanied by the flight of storm-clouds, by the tempestuous fugue of the heavens.

"The Quarter collapsed..."

The narrator fell silent...

"...A drum was lying flat among the ruins, and I, Ivan Babichev, climbed on top of it. Ophelia was hurrying towards me, dragging Andrei, crushed and dying.

"'Let me lie on the pillow, brother,' he whispered. 'I want to die on the pillow. I give in, Ivan...'

"I put the pillow on my lap and he laid his head on it.

"'We've won, Ophelia,' I said."

VII

One Sunday morning Ivan Babichev visited Kavalеров and solemnly announced:

"Today I want to show you Valya."

They set off. Their walk could best be described as marvellous. It took them through the deserted, resting city. They went a round-about way to Teatralnaya Square. There was hardly any traffic about. The slope up Tvers-

kaya Street shimmered blue. A Sunday morning gives you one of the best glimpses of a Moscow summer. The lighting, unbroken by the traffic, stayed constant, just as though the sun had only just risen. Thus, they walked through geometrical patterns of light and shade or, to be more precise, through three-dimensional patterns, as the light and shade crossed each other in the air as well as on the ground. Before reaching the Moscow City Soviet, they found themselves completely in the shade. But in the gap between the two buildings there was a large wedge of light, which was thick, almost dense, leaving no doubt that light contains substance: the dust flying about in it could pass for light waves in the ether.

Next came the side-street linking Tverskaya Street with Nikitskaya Street where they stood for a while, admiring the flowering hedge.

They went through some gates and up a wooden staircase leading to a glassed-in passageway, which was shabby but cheerful-looking on account of the many glass panes and view of the sky that one had through these latticed panes.

The sky was broken into strips of varying shades of blue and proximity to the viewer. A quarter of the panes were missing. The little green tails of some sort of creeper growing along the outside wall of the passageway were slinking through the bottom row of windows. This was an ideal place for children to play in. Pet rabbits could be kept here, too.

Ivan hurried along the passageway towards the last of three doors.

As he passed by, Kavalеров tried to pull off one of the little green tails. As soon as he tugged at it, the whole unseen network outside came dragging along after it, and from somewhere there came a moan — the sound of some wire or other which had become entangled in the life of this creeper or goodness alone knows what it was. (It was just like being in Italy, not Moscow...) As he pulled, Kavalеров pressed his temple against the window and caught sight of a courtyard enclosed by a stone wall. The passageway ran along between the first and second floors. From up here he could see over the wall (still feeling he was in Italy) a terribly green patch of lawn.

As soon as he had stepped inside the porch, he had heard voices and laughter coming from the lawn. But before he managed to work anything out, his attention was distracted by Ivan banging on the door once, twice, three times...

"Nobody's in," he mumbled. "She's already gone..."

Kavalеров's mind was still there, by the broken windowpane over the lawn. Why? After all, so far he had seen nothing amazing. He had caught, before he was diverted by Ivan's knocking, just one bunch of speckled light, one beat of gymnastic rhythm. Simply, the green lawn had been a pleasant, sweet, cool and unexpected treat for the eyes after the ordinary-looking courtyard. He most likely assured himself later that he was at once captivated by the lawn's beauty.

"She's already gone!" repeated Babichev. "Now let's see..."

And he looked out of one of the windows. Kavalero^v immediately did the same.

What had seemed like a lawn to him was in fact a small yard overgrown with grass. The main source of greenness was the tall, thick-crowned trees lining it. All this verdure was blooming under the house's huge blank wall. Kavalero^v was observing it from above, and from his viewpoint the yard looked cramped. The whole neighbourhood, which he could see from his high vantage point, was pressing down on the yard. It lay there like a mat in a room cluttered with furniture. Other people's roofs revealed their secrets to Kavalero^v. He saw life-size weather vanes, dormer windows of which nobody down below had any idea, and a child's ball, lost forever when it had flown too high and rolled under a gutter. Buildings, spiked with aerials, descended in tiers from the yard. The round dome of a church, freshly painted with red lead, poised in an empty patch of sky and looked as though it had been soaring there until Kavalero^v had arrested it with his gaze. He spotted the wishbone-shaped rods of a tramcar in a street miles away, and some other observer leaning out of a distant window and sniffing something or eating it. In keeping with the laws of perspective, he was nearly resting on the wishbone.

But the yard was the main thing.

They went downstairs. There turned out to be a hole in the stone wall separating the courtyard from the little yard, the boring empty courtyard from the mysterious lawn. There were several stones missing, like loaves

removed from a stove. Through this hole they saw everything. The sun was burning the top of Kavalеров's head. What they saw was a high-jump practice: a rope was stretched between two small poles, and a young man took off, tilting his body sideways over the rope, and almost glided as he stretched out parallel to the obstacle. It looked more like he was rolling over the obstacle, as though it were a mound. And as he rolled over, he threw his legs up and flicked them out, like a swimmer pushing himself off. In the next split second his upside-down, distorted face flashed by on its way down, and then Kavalеров saw him standing on the ground. What's more, as he hit the ground he emitted a sound like 'aff', either an exhaled breath cut short or the thud of his heel on the grass.

Ivan pinched Kavalеров's elbow.

"There she is ... look..." (In a whisper.)

Everyone on the lawn began shouting and clapping. The high-jumper, wearing next to nothing, walked to one side, limping slightly, probably to show off his athletic prowess.

It was Volodya Makarov.

Kavalеров was stunned. He felt overwhelmingly ashamed and afraid. Volodya revealed a whole flashing cage of teeth as he smiled.

...Up in the passageway there is a knock on the door again. Kavalеров turns round. How very foolish it would have been to be caught prying down here by the wall... Someone was walking along the passageway. The little windows dissected him as he went. Parts of his body were moving independently. The result was an optical illusion. The head moved before

the body. Kavalero v recognises the head. It is Andrei Babichev floating along the passageway.

"Andrei Petrovich!" shouts Valya from the lawn. "Andrei Petrovich! Come here! Come here!"

The terrible visitor is gone. He leaves the passageway and looks for the way down onto the lawn. Various barriers conceal him from Kavalero v who realises he must escape.

"This way! This way!" Valya's voice keeps ringing out.

Kavalero v sees Valya standing on the lawn, her legs firmly spread apart. She is in black, cut-away shorts, her legs are terribly bare, and can be seen all the way up. She is wearing white sports shoes without socks; and these flat shoes make her posture firmer still, more like a man's or a child's than a woman's. Her legs are dirty, tanned and shiny: a little girl's legs which have been exposed so often to the sun and air, to tumbles onto grass and bangs that they are coarse and covered with light brown cuts from prematurely torn-off scabs, and her knees are rough like oranges. Youth and an inner awareness of her physical beauty entitle her to treat her legs with such neglect. But higher up, under the black shorts, her skin is smooth and delicate, showing how lovely she will be when she becomes a mature woman, when she starts taking an interest in herself and wants to be attractive, and when the cuts heal, all the scabs fall off and her tan becomes even all over...

He brushed the dust off his suit and began running along the blank wall away from the hole, dirtying his shoulder against the stones.

"Where are you going?" Ivan called after him. "Where are you dashing to? Wait!"

"He's shouting so loudly! They'll hear!" thought Kavalero in horror. "They'll spot me!"

And sure enough, it suddenly grew quiet on the other side of the wall. They were listening. Ivan caught Kavalero up.

"Listen, my friend... Did you see? That was my brother! Did you see? Volodya, Valya... All of them! The whole lot... Wait, I'll just climb up the wall and tell them off... You're covered in something white, Kavalero, like a miller!"

Kavalero said quietly:

"I know your brother very well. It was he who kicked me out. He's the important person I was telling you about... Our fates are similar. You've said that I must kill your brother... What am I to do now?"

Valya was sitting on the wall.

"Dad!" she exclaimed with a gasp.

Ivan caught hold of her dangling legs.

"Valya, pluck out my eyes. I want to be blind," he said in a choking voice. "I don't want to see anything: lawns, branches, flowers, knights, cowards, nothing. I must go blind, Valya. I was wrong... I thought all feelings had perished — love, devotion, tenderness... But they're all still there, Valya, only not for us — all we've got is envy and more envy... Pluck out my eyes, Valya, I want to be blind..."

He slid his hands over the girl's moist legs, his face and front brushing against them, and slumped down at the bottom of the wall.

"Let's drink, Kavalеров," said Ivan. "Let's drink, Kavalеров, to our youth that has passed, to the conspiracy of feelings which has flopped, and to the machine which does not exist and never will..."

"You're a son of a bitch, Ivan Babichev!" (Kavalеров grabbed Ivan by the scruff of the neck.) "My youth has not passed! No! Do you hear? It's a lie! I'll show you... Tomorrow, do you hear? Tomorrow at the football match I'm going to kill your brother..."

VIII

Nikolai Kavalеров had a seat in the stand. To the right, and above him, in a wooden box, surrounded by flags, posters with enormous letters, steps and criss-crossed planks, sat Valya. Young people were filling up the box.

It was a very bright, blowy day, and the wind was whistling from all directions. The huge, smooth green field shone like varnish.

Kavalеров stared hard at the box, straining his eyes, and when they grew tired, he used his imagination and tried to work out what he could not see or hear from where he was. And he was not the only one — many of the spectators sitting close to the box, despite being excited by the prospect of an exceptional spectacle, noticed the charming girl in the pink dress, who was hardly more than a child, and who sat and moved in a childishly nonchalant way and yet had something about her which made them all want to be seen by her, just as though she was a celebrity or the daughter

of a famous person.

Twenty thousand spectators had crammed into the stadium to see a very special event: the long-awaited match between the Moscow and German teams.

In the stands people were arguing, shouting and bickering over trifles. The stadium was bursting at the seams with this vast crowd of people. Somewhere railings cracked, emitting duck-like wails. Getting entangled in people's knees as he searched for his seat, KavaleroV saw a respectable-looking old man in a cream-coloured waistcoat sprawling on the path at the foot of the stand. His arms outstretched, he was panting heavily, while people kept pushing ahead without taking any notice of him. The suspense was heightened by the wind which was making the flags on the towers flash like lightning.

With all his heart and soul KavaleroV longed to be near the box. Valya was sitting at a tangent above him, about sixty feet away. His eyesight was playing tricks with him. He kept thinking that their eyes were meeting. And he would stand up and her medallion would then look as if it had burst into flames. The wind did what it wanted with her. She kept having to clutch hold of her shiny red straw hat. The wind blew her sleeve right back to her shoulder, baring the top of her arm which was as slender as a flute. Her programme sheet flew out of her hand and landed in the thick of the crowd, fluttering its wings.

For as much as a month before the match the football enthusiasts had reckoned the German team would be bringing Getzke, their

famous centre forward and key attacker. Now it appeared that Getzke had indeed come. As soon as the German team came out onto the field, accompanied by the strains of a march, and before the players had had time to take up their positions, the fans (as is always the case) had picked the star out, even though Getzke was walking inconspicuously among the other players.

"Getzke! Getzke!" they started chanting, deriving particular pleasure from seeing the star player and from being able to clap him.

Getzke, who turned out to be a stocky, dark-complexioned man with round shoulders, stepped slightly out of the crowd, stopped, clasped his hands over his head and shook them. This unfamiliar foreign way of returning a greeting excited the fans even more.

In the fresh air, against the green background, the eleven German players' clothes gleamed like oil paints. They were in orange, almost golden jerseys with green and mauve stripes on their right breasts and black shorts which kept billowing out in the wind.

Volodya Makarov, cringing with cold after putting on his football shirt, kept glancing at the German players out of the window of the changing-room. When the Germans had reached the middle of the field, he asked: "Well, shall we be off, then? Shall we go, then?"

"Let's go!" ordered the team captain.

The Soviet team came running out in their red shirts and white shorts. The fans leaned over the railings, stamping their feet on the boards. Their roars drowned the music.

According to the toss, the Germans were to play the first half of the match into the wind.

Our side not only did their uttermost to play as well as possible but also, like the fans, kept a constant eye on the Germans' game while evaluating it as professionals. The game lasted ninety minutes with a short half-time in the middle. In the second half the teams change ends, and so in windy weather it pays off to play against the wind when the players are still fresh.

As the Germans were playing into the wind in the first half, and the wind was very strong, most of the time the ball was blown towards the Soviet goal posts and hardly ever left the Soviet half of the field. The Soviet fullbacks kicked some high parabolic shots but the ball would slide along the wall of wind, spin like a yellow streak, and then come flying back again. The Germans attacked fiercely. The famous Getzke certainly lived up to his reputation and stayed constantly in the limelight.

Whenever he got the ball, Valya, perched high up, would squeal as though she expected any moment now to see some terrible crime. He broke through the Soviet defense line, leaving a trail of Soviet players, who had been bowled over by his speed and continuous attack, and kicked at the goal. Then Valya would lurch sideways and clutch her neighbour's arm, press her cheek against it and hide her face so as to miss the awful moment, and then, unable to tear her eyes away, she would look askance at the terrible movements of

Getzke who seemed black from running about in the heat.

But Volodya Makarov, the Soviet goalkeeper, kept catching the ball. Leaving the movement with which he kicked the ball uncompleted, Getzke would gracefully check himself, go through the necessary motions, and turn and run with his back hunched and his tight orange jersey blackened with sweat. Valya would at once sit up straight again and start laughing, firstly, because she was pleased a goal had not been scored against the Soviet team, and, secondly, because she remembered how only a moment ago she had squealed and clutched hold of her neighbour's arm.

"Makarov! Makarov! Well done, Makarov!" she shouted along with all the rest.

The ball was constantly flying towards the Soviet goal. Every time it hit the posts, they would moan, and whitewash would come showering down... Volodya would catch the ball at angles which seemed mathematically impossible. The packed stadium, the whole live slope of the stand, seemed to become steeper as every spectator leapt to his feet, seized by the terrible, impatient desire to see the most interesting part at long last — the scoring of a goal. The referee stuck his whistle in his mouth as he ran along, ready to acknowledge a goal... Volodya did not seize hold of the ball, he plucked it from its line of flight, and by violating the laws of physics, subjected himself to the stunning effect of the enraged forces. He soared upwards with the ball, spinning round just like he were screwing himself onto it: he clutched the ball with his

whole body — knees, stomach and chin, throwing his weight onto the speeding ball, like one would throw rags onto a fire to put it out. The speed of the ball he caught sometimes threw him two metres sideways and he would drop like a brightly-coloured paper bomb. The German forwards would rush at him but in the end the ball would go flying high over the fray.

Volodya would stay behind in the goal but he could not stand still. He would walk across the goal mouth from one post to the other, in an attempt to stifle the bursts of energy stimulated by his struggling with the ball. He was buzzing with vitality. He swung his arms, brushed the dirt off his outfit and kicked tufts of earth with the toes of his boot. Smart at the start of play, he now consisted of a bunch of rags on a dirty body and huge fingerless leather gloves. These breaks did not last long, however. Once again the German attack came rolling up to the Moscow goal. Volodya desperately wanted his side to win and was anxious about each of the players. He thought that he alone understood how to play against Getzke, his weak points and the ways to fend off his attacks. He was also curious to know what opinion the famous German player had of the Soviet standard of play. Whenever he clapped and shouted "hurrah" to one of the Soviet defence players, Volodya felt like shouting to Getzke:

"See how we play! Do we play well, what do you think?"

As a footballer, Volodya was the complete opposite of Getzke. Whereas Volodya was a pro-

fessional sportsman, the latter was a professional player. Volodya was interested in the general course of the game, victory and outcome, while Getzke was only concerned about showing his personal mastery. He was an old, experienced player who cared little about his team's reputation; he valued only his own success; he was not a permanent member of any sports organisation because he had compromised himself by changing clubs for money. He had been banned from participating in the German club championships, and was only invited to play in friendly and show games, and on tours abroad. He was not only skilful but also lucky. His participation made a team dangerous. He despised all other players, regardless of which side they were on. He knew he could score against any team, and nothing else mattered. He never really put his heart and soul into the game.

Half-way through the match the spectators already felt that the Soviet team was not going to be beaten by the Germans. They were not attacking properly because of Getzke who kept spoiling their combinations. He was playing quite by himself, taking needless risks, and without being helped or giving help. Once he got the ball, he would draw all the game's strings, so to say, towards him, wind them up in a ball, let them out and distort them, shift them from one wing to the other according to his own schemes, which were baffling for his team-mates, and relying entirely on his own speed and ability to dodge opponents.

This made the crowd decide that in the second half of the game when Getzke had worn himself out and the Soviet side were playing into the wind, the Germans would be thrashed. Just as long as the Soviets held out, without letting a single ball into their goal.

But this time the crack player Getzke got his own way. Ten minutes before half-time he broke through to the right wing, propelling the ball forward with his body, stopped sharply, outwitting his pursuer who, not expecting him to stop, ran on and to the right. He turned with the ball towards the centre and then kicked it through a clear space, dodging past only one Soviet defence player, and heading straight towards the goal, looking now down at his feet, now at the goal, as if calculating the best moment to make his shot, its speed, and angle.

A continuous 'ooo' rolled down from the stands.

Volodya planted his legs wide apart and flung his arms out as though he was clutching an invisible barrel, and got ready to intercept the ball. Getzke dribbled the ball fast right up to the goal. Volodya dived under his feet. The ball got wedged under them both; the spectators' whistles and stamping drowned the end of the scene. One of them must have kicked the ball for it soared falteringly above Getzke's head, and the latter tossed it into the net with a bowing movement of the head.

Thus, the Soviet side was one goal down.

The stadium thundered, the binoculars were turned towards the Soviet goal. Getzke, looking

at his flashing boots, jogged coquettishly back to the centre.

Volodya was helped up by his team-mates.

IX

Valya turned and looked in the same direction as everyone else, KavaleroV caught sight of her face. He was sure she could see him. He began fidgeting, and a strange suspicion infuriated him. He imagined that everyone around had noticed his confusion and was laughing at him.

He glanced round at the people sitting next to him. And it came as a great shock to him to see Andrei Babichev sitting very close-by in the same corner of the stand. Once again KavaleroV felt irritated by the two white hands adjusting the binoculars, the massive torso in a grey jacket and the trimmed moustache...

The binoculars hung over KavaleroV like a black shell. Their straps hung like reins from Babichev's cheeks.

The Germans were attacking again.

All of a sudden someone gave the ball a powerful and miscalculated kick, and it flew sideways off the field in KavaleroV's direction, whistled over ducked heads in the lower rows, stopped for a moment, and then, all its surfaces spinning, dropped down onto the boards at KavaleroV's feet. Play stopped. The players froze at this unexpected delay. The scene of the field, green and gaily-coloured, moving all the time, was now static in the same way as a motion picture is when the film snaps,

the lights in the hall go on and before the projectionist has time to turn off the projection lamps. The audience sees a strangely overexposed shot and the outline of the main character, keeping perfectly still when he should have been moving fast. Kavalеров's irritation increased. Everyone was laughing around him. The sight of a ball landing in the stands always arouses laughter: it is as if the spectators suddenly become aware of the utter absurdity of people running after a ball for an hour and a half and making them, the onlookers, take such a serious and passionate interest in their totally unserious pursuit.

Just then all the thousands present bestowed their undemanded attention totally on Kavalеров, and it felt like they were mocking him.

Maybe Valya was also laughing at him, at the man who had landed up with the ball! Maybe, she was doubly enjoying laughing at an enemy in a comic situation. He smirked and moved his foot away from the ball which, losing its support, again rubbed against his heel like an affectionate cat.

"Come on!" shouted out Babichev in an annoyed and surprised tone.

Kavalеров was passive. Two large white hands reached for the ball. Someone lifted the ball and handed it to Babichev. He stood erect and sticking out his stomach, swung his hands holding onto the ball over his head so as to hurl it as far as he could. It was impossible to look serious doing something like this, and realising he ought to look serious, he overdid

it by scowling and pursing his fresh red lips too hard.

He rocked forward vigorously, tossed the ball and magically freed the field of its fetters.

"He doesn't recognise me," thought Kavalero, seething with anger.

The first half ended with the Germans leading 1-0... With dark sweat pouring down their faces and green threads of grass sticking to their bodies, the players strode powerfully towards the exit, lifting their bare knees high as though treading water. The Germans, their faces an unRussian shade of red from the temples down, were shuffled with the Moscow players in a brightly coloured pack. The players walked along, taking in the whole crowd at once along the plank walls of the passage, and seeing nobody in particular. They smiled blindly at the crowd, their glazed eyes too transparent-looking on their darkened faces. People who had just seen them as small multicoloured figures darting about and falling on the field, now saw them close-up. The noise of the game, which had still not died down, moved along with them. Getzke, who looked like a gypsy, was walking along and sucking a cut he had just received above the elbow.

At close range the spectators were surprised by various details of the players' appearance — their height, build, bruises, heavy breathing, and very crumpled clothing. From a distance they had all looked fresher and more decorative.

Kavalero forced his way out of the crowd and, climbing under a barrier of some kind, was relieved to feel the grass under his feet. Here, in the shade, he ran with the others

along the path encircling the back of the stands. The buffet which had been set up on a patch of grass under the trees was packed in a trice. The crumpled old man in the cream-coloured waistcoat was eating icecream, still casting annoyed furtive glances at the people around. A crowd was pressing towards the players' changing rooms.

"Three cheers for Makarov! Hip-hip! Hurray!" came cries of delight from that direction. Fans climbed onto fences, kicking off tangles of barbed wire as they would flick away bees, and clambering higher up, too, onto trees, into the dark leaves, swaying adroitly in the wind like wood elves.

A body rose obliquely over the crowd, shiny and naked. Volodya Makarov was being tossed in the air.

Kavalerov did not dare to force his way into the triumphal ring. He hovered behind the crowd, peeping through gaps.

Volodya was now standing on the ground. One of his socks had slipped down and formed a green bread ring round his pear-shaped calf which was lightly covered with hair. His torn shirt hardly clung to his body. He crossed his arms modestly over his chest.

And there stood Valya and Andrei Babichev next to her.

The crowd was clapping all three.

Babichev gazed affectionately at Volodya.

The wind intervened. A striped peg collapsed, all the foliage swung to the right. The ring of idlers disintegrated, the whole scene dissolved, people escaped from the dust. Valya got it worse than anyone else. Her pink dress, which

was as light as a feather, flew up her legs, showing KavaleroV how transparent it was. The wind blew the dress up to her face and KavaleroV could see its outline in the shiny transparent cloth being fanned out by the wind. Through the dust KavaleroV saw not only this but also how she started spinning round, trying to catch her dress, and got entangled and nearly fell over. She tried to press her hem down over her knees and clamp it down but, failing to do so, she put an end to the nonsense by resorting to half-measures: bending down, she grabbed hold of her legs, which were too bare, and hid her knees, like a flimsily clad bather caught unawares.

In the distance the referee blew his whistle. A march struck up. So ended the amusing interlude. The second half of the game began. Volodya dashed off.

"At least two goals against the Germans!" shouted a little boy rushing past KavaleroV.

Valya went on battling against the wind. Chasing after her hem she changed position about ten times and ended up within whispering range of KavaleroV.

She stood with her legs spread far apart, holding her hat in her hands which had been blown off by the wind and caught in midflight. Still breathless after jumping for her hat, she looked at KavaleroV without seeing him, cocking her head with its close-cropped, page-boy styled auburn hair slightly to one side.

A sunbeam slipped across her shoulder, she swayed and her collarbones glinted like daggers. They stared at one another for a mere five or six seconds, and at once KavaleroV

experienced a chilling sensation as he realised what incurable nostalgia he would have forever now that he had seen her, an alien and remarkable being from another world. He also saw how hopelessly sweet she was and how oppressively unattainable and pure, both because of her tender age and because she loved Volodya, and how inaccessible her seductive charm was.

Babichev was waiting for her with his arm outstretched.

"Valya," said Kavalеров. "I've been waiting for you all my life. Have pity on me..."

But she did not hear. She ran along, stooping in the wind.

X

That night Kavalеров came home drunk.

He went down the corridor to the tap to quench his thirst. He turned it full on and drenched himself. Then he left the jet of water blasting from the tap and went to Anna's room. The light was still on. The widow was sitting on her huge bed, bathed in dull yellow light, dangling her legs over the side, obviously ready to settle down.

Kavalеров strode forward. She said nothing, spellbound. He thought she was smiling enticingly.

He walked up to her.

She did not resist, indeed, she even opened her arms.

"Oh, you little worm," she whispered, "oh, you little worm."

Later, he kept waking up. He was dying of thirst and had a crazy, drunken craving for water. He kept waking up to silence. A second before waking he would recall the jet of water blasting into the basin, and the vivid memory would shake him awake but there was no water. He would sink down again. While he slept, the widow bustled about, turning off the tap, undressing him and mending his braces. Morning came. At first he could not make head or tail of anything. Like a drunk beggar in a comedy who had been picked up by a wealthy man and brought to a palace, he lay there dazed by the unfamiliar luxury around him. He caught sight of his strange reflection in the mirror — soles in the foreground. He was lying majestically with one arm folded behind his head. Slanting sunlight was pouring down over him and he was floating in wide smouldering beams, like in a church dome. Overhead were dangling clusters of grapes, dancing cupids, apples spilling from cornucopia — and he thought he heard the solemn droning of an organ coming from them all. He was lying on Anna's bed.

"You remind me of him," Anna whispered hotly, leaning over him.

A glass-covered daguerreotype hung over the bed. It was of a man, someone's young grandfather, dressed in formal attire in one of the last frock-coats of the bygone era. You felt the back of his head was strong and multi-barrelled. He was about fifty-seven.

Kavalerov recalled his father changing shirts...

"You remind me very much of my

husband," repeated Anna, embracing Kavalero. And Kavalero's head disappeared into her armpit like into a tent. The widow had opened the folds of her armpits. Joy and shame raged inside her.

"He also took me ... like this ... by cunning... Ever-so quiet he was, never said a word ... and then! Oh, my little worm..."

Kavalero hit her.

She was staggered. Kavalero jumped off the bed, tearing off layers of linen; sheets trailed after him. She rushed towards the door, her hands screaming for help, she ran, pursued by her scattered belongings like a woman from Pompei. A washbasket tumbled to the floor, a chair tilted over.

He struck her several times across the back, across her spine encircled by a tyre of fat.

The chair was standing on one foot.

"He used to beat me too," she said, smiling through her tears.

Kavalero went back to bed. He sank down, feeling weak. He lay in a state of semi-consciousness all day. In the evening the widow lay down beside him and started snoring. Kavalero imagined her larynx in the shape of an archway leading into a dark abyss. He hid behind the vaults of the archway. Everything was shaking and shuddering, and the ground was quaking. He slipped and fell under the jet of air gushing out of the abyss. The sleeping woman moaned. As soon as she stopped moaning, she smacked her lips loudly and fell silent. The whole architecture of her larynx collapsed. Her snoring became powdery, fizzy.

Kavalerov tossed about and wept. And she would get up and lay a wet towel against his forehead. He would stretch towards the moisture, raising himself, and groping for the towel with his hands, crumpling it, putting it under his cheek, kissing it and murmuring:

"They've stolen her. How hard it is for me to live in this world... How hard it is..."

And almost as soon as her head touched the pillow, the widow fell asleep again, snuggling against the mirror arc. Sleep smeared her all over with sweetness. She slept with her mouth open, making gurgling noises like an old woman.

There were bedbugs, too, rustling about like someone was stripping wallpaper. The bedbugs' hiding places, which were invisible in the light of day, opened up. The bed's wooden frame swelled and grew.

The window-sill began to turn pink.

Shadows swirled around the bed. Nocturnal secrets stole out of corners, down walls, slipped over the sleepers, and slithered under the bed.

Kavalerov suddenly sat up, his eyes wide open.

Ivan was standing over the bed.

XI

Kavalerov started getting ready at once.

Anna was asleep, perched under the arc, her arms round her belly. So as not to disturb her, he carefully removed the blanket from the bed, put it on like a cape, and stood facing Ivan.

"Well, excellent," said Ivan. "You're as shiny as a lizard. This is how you'll appear before the people. Come on, come on! We must hurry."

"I'm very sick," sighed Kavalero; he was smiling feebly, as though apologizing for not wanting to hunt for his trousers, jacket and shoes. "Is it all right if I go barefoot?"

But Ivan was already in the corridor. Kavalero hurried after him.

"I've suffered all this time for nothing," Kavalero thought. "The day of redemption has now come."

The stream of people swept them along. A blazing road opened up round the nearest corner.

"There it is!" said Ivan, squeezing Kavalero's arm. "There's the Quarter!"

Kavalero saw gardens, spherical cupolas of foliage, an archway of light, transparent stone, galleries, the flight of a hall over the greenery...

"This way!" ordered Ivan.

They ran along an ivy-covered wall, and then had to jump. The blue blanket helped Kavalero jump: he floated through the air over the crowd and landed at the foot of a very wide stone staircase. Taking fright, he at once started crawling under his blanket like an insect with folded wings. Nobody had noticed him. He hid behind the plinth of a column.

On the top of the staircase, surrounded by a crowd of people, stood Andrei Babichev, his arm round Volodya's shoulders.

"She's going to be brought out now," said

Andrei, smiling at his friends.

And then KavaleroV saw a band walking alone the asphalt road towards the staircase, and Valya hovering above it, the sound of the instruments keeping her alight. She was being borne along by the music, now rising, now dipping into the trumpets, depending on the pitch and volume of the sound. Her ribbons flew above her head, her dress billowed out and her hair streamed upwards.

The last musical passage tossed her up to the top of the staircase where she fell into Volodya's arms. The crowd drew back and formed a circle around the two of them.

KavaleroV did not see what happened next. He was seized by terror. A strange shadow suddenly moved out in front of him. Horror-stricken, he turned slowly and saw Ophelia sitting on the grass behind him.

"A-a-a-a-ah!" he screamed in a dreadful voice and tried to escape, but with a jingle Ophelia grabbed him by the blanket. It slipped off. In this shameful state he scrambled up the staircase, tripping, stumbling, hitting his jaw on the stone. The people looked down from above. Delightful Valya stood there leaning over.

"Go back, Ophelia!" commanded Ivan.
"She won't obey me... Ophelia, stop!"

"Hold her!"

"She'll kill him!"

"Oh!"

"Look! Look! Look!"

KavaleroV glanced round from the middle of the staircase. Ivan was trying to scramble up the wall, pulling off the ivy. The crowd

rushed back. Ivan was hanging from the wall, his arms outstretched. A terrible iron thing was moving slowly through the grass towards him. A glinting needle was quietly drawing out of what could be described as the thing's head. Ivan was whimpering. His hands were losing their grip. He slipped down and his bowl-er rolled off among the dandelions. He sat there huddled in a ball with his back to the wall and his hands over his face. The machine moved forward, chopping the dandelions off as it went.

Kavalerov stood up and shouted in a voice full of despair:

"Save him! Are you really going to let a machine kill a man?!"

He got no answer.

"I should be at his side!" said Kavalerov. "Teacher! I will die with you!"

But it was too late. Ivan's rabbit-like squeal made him keel over. As he fell, he saw Ivan pinned to the wall.

Ivan was quietly leaning forward, turning round the awful axis.

Kavalerov wrapped his head in his hands so as not to see or hear anything else. But he still heard a jangling sound. The machine was mounting the stairs.

"No!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "She'll kill me! Forgive me! Forgive me! Have mercy on me! It wasn't me who disgraced the machine! I'm not to blame! Valya! Valya! Save me!"

XII

Kavalerov was ill for three days and nights. As soon as he felt better, he ran away.

He slipped down, keeping his eyes focussed on one point, on a corner under the bed. He was dressing mechanically when he suddenly felt a new leather strap on his braces. The widow had done away with the safety pin. Where had she got the strap from? Maybe she had cut it off her husband's old braces? Kavalerov fully understood how disgusting his position was. He rushed out into the corridor without his jacket. On his way he undid the red braces and threw them down.

Before stepping out onto the landing he paused. There were no voices coming from the yard. Then he stepped onto the landing and all his thoughts became muddled. He felt the sweetest of sensations — languor and joy. It was a lovely morning. There was a light breeze (just like someone was turning the pages of a book) and the sky was pale blue. Kavalerov stood over a rubbish heap. A cat he had startled darted out of the rubbish bin, causing some kind of muck to spill out after it. What poetry could there be in this much-cursed dump? But he stood still, his head thrown back and his arms stretched out.

At that instant he felt that the time had come: here was the boundary line between two existences — a time of catastrophe! Oh, to break, break with everything that had been, right now, this minute, in just two heart beats. He had to cross the boundary line, and life, the revolting ugly life, not his but someone

else's which had been forced upon him, would be left behind...

He stood with his eyes wide open, and because of his running and anxiety, and because he was still weak, his entire field of vision pulsed in front of him, and was tinged pink.

He understood how low he had fallen. It was bound to happen. His life had been too easy and self-sufficient, he had too high an opinion of himself when he really was lazy, dirty-minded and lascivious...

Kavalerov understood everything as he flew over the dump.

He went back, picked up his braces and got dressed. A spoon jingled — the widow streamed after him but he left the house without even a backward glance. Once again he spent the night on a park bench. And once again he went back. But now he had firmly made up his mind!

"I'll put the widow in her place. I won't let her even hint at what happened. All sorts of things can happen when a person's drunk. But I can't live outside in the street."

The widow was lighting the burner over the stove. She looked askance at him and smiled smugly. He went into the room. Ivan's bowler was perched on a corner of the cupboard.

Ivan was sitting on the bed, looking like a slightly smaller version of his brother. The blanket enveloped him like a cloud. There was a bottle of wine on the table. Ivan was sipping red wine from a glass. Evidently, he had only just woken up; his face had not yet smoothed out, and he was

still scratching himself sleepily somewhere under the blanket.

Kavalerov asked the classic question:

"What does this mean?"

Ivan smiled brightly.

"It means, my friend, that we must have a drink. We need another glass, Anna!"

Anna came in and poked inside the cupboard.

"Don't be jealous, Kolya," she said, hugging Kavalerov. "He's ever-so lonely, just like you. I feel sorry for you both."

"What does this mean?" asked Kavalerov quietly.

"What are you nagging for?" snapped Ivan. "It doesn't mean anything."

He slipped off the bed, holding his underpants up, and poured Kavalerov some wine.

"Let's drink, Kavalerov... We've spoken a lot about feelings... And, my friend, we've forgotten the main thing... Indifference... Isn't that so? In fact... If you ask me, indifference is the best state for a person's mind to be in. Let's be indifferent, Kavalerov! Just look! You and I have found peace, my dear. Drink up. Here's to indifference. Cheers! Here's to Anna! And today, by the way ... listen: I've got some good news for you — today, Kavalerov, it's your turn to sleep with Anna. Cheers!"

REQUEST TO READERS

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Readers all over the world are acquainted with the writings of Yuri Olesha (1899-1960), author of the fairytale novel *The Three Fat Men* (1928).

The novel *Envy* (1927), generally regarded as the writer's debut, is one of the first works about Soviet everyday life. As the author said himself, this novel reflected the transition from the world of private property to the new world. The struggle against prejudices of the past, against the petty bourgeois and Philistines, all this was seen in the sharp social conflict which existed when the Soviet government was being established. The author uses biting satire to debunk the old way of life. The main hero, Kavalеров, is a tragicomic figure. The tragedy of this intelligent and perceptive man lies in the fact that while feeling he has the strength to act, he does nothing, preferring to take up the stance of a proud, misunderstood, lonely individual, living at odds with the new times.



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